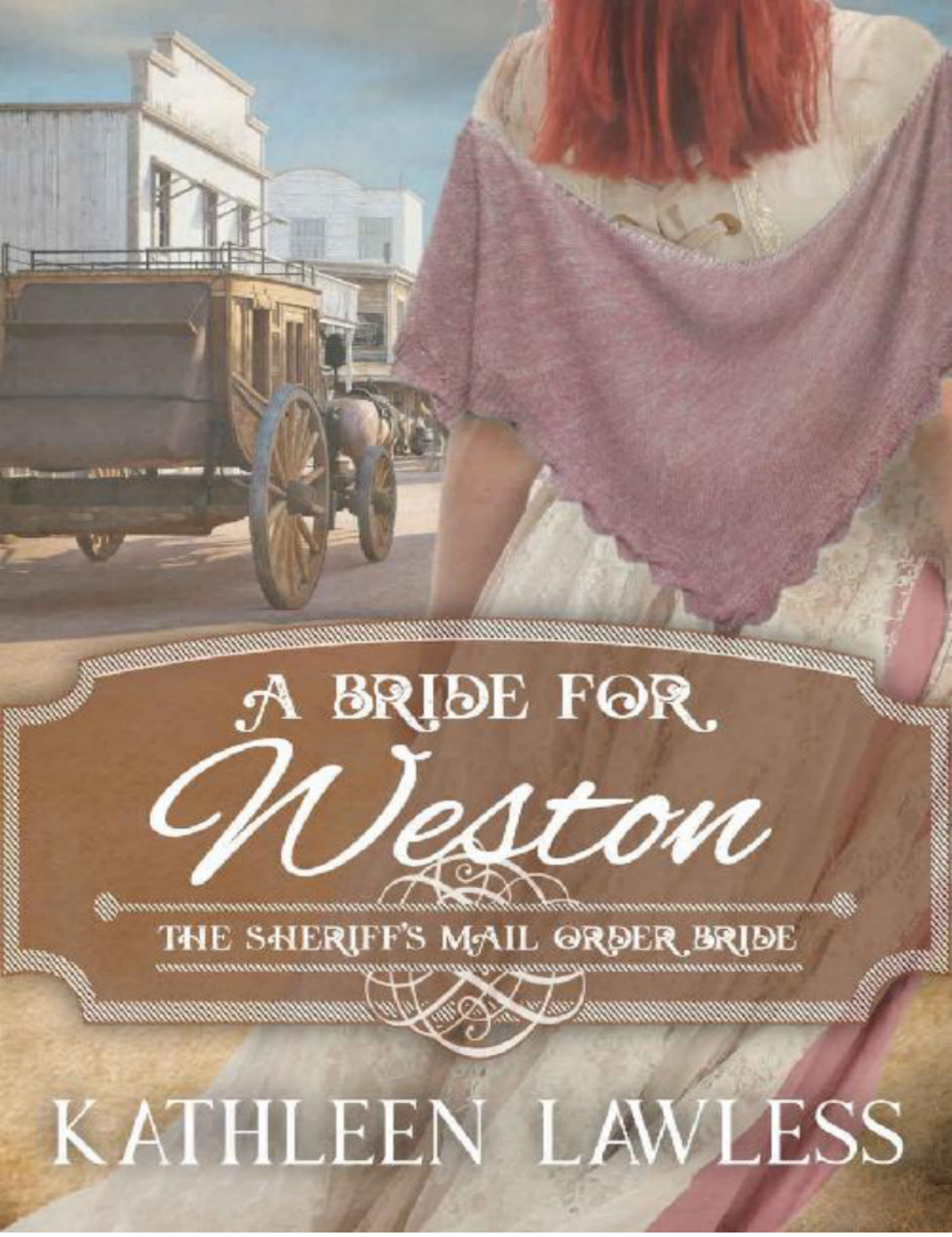

A BRIDE FOR
Weston
THE SHERIFF'S MAIL ORDER BRIDE
KATHLEEN LAWLESS

A Bride for Weston

The Sheriff's Mail Order Bride



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DEDICATION

All the wonderful authors at Romance Gems for their wisdom, support, and shares.

Chapter 1

Seeking an unusual woman for matrimony. A helpmate in the serving of justice. Marriage in name only. Sheriff Holmes, Ridgemont, Colorado.

Talia spent most of the trip West praying she wasn't making the biggest mistake of her life. And Lord knew, there'd been plenty of mistakes thus far in her twenty-some years on earth. She took solace from the fact that a group of women she knew and trusted from the church back home were convinced this was the right choice.

To date, the group had matched dozens of destitute, young, female parishioners with lonely, God-fearing bachelors on the other side of the country. Two of them even remembered Sheriff Holmes's father, a preacher who had, unfortunately, been killed doing the Lord's work. They encouraged her to put her name forward.

"What does marriage 'in name only' mean?" she had asked one of the older ladies from the church who was helping her pen her response to the sheriff.

"He means it won't be necessary for you to share his bed."

The man she married five years ago hadn't seemed to care for that activity either, and his lack of interest, at first puzzling, was something she came to accept. And something they never discussed.

She wasn't sure what kind of helper the sheriff needed, office work perhaps, but compared to working off her deceased husband's tavern debts, this chance to make a fresh start far from the Brooklyn docks and the tenement where she grew up seemed like the answer to a prayer, and before long she had a train ticket in her hand.

Her heart rate sped up as the train began to slow. "Next stop, Durango," yelled the conductor. Talia rose and wiped her damp palms on the front of her best skirt. A dull-colored, serviceable cotton, it had been nothing special to start with, even before it became wrinkled and dusty from the trip. As she prepared to disembark, she wondered what kind of woman the sheriff was expecting, and prayed he was a kind man.

Passengers pushed past her in a bid to be first off, and she made a quick sign of the cross as she patiently waited for others to go ahead.

At last she reached the platform, trying to get used to the feel of firm ground underfoot after a lengthy journey by rail. As she stared at her surroundings, inhaling the unfamiliar, dry, desert air, a man approached, dark-hair visible beneath his brown Stetson, sunlight hitting a silver star pinned to his chest. She smiled tentatively, but he walked right past her as if she was invisible.

"Sheriff?" she called. "Sheriff Holmes?"

He turned and his eyes raked over her in an impatient way that left her feeling wanting. He took a tentative step toward her, eyes narrowed. "Mrs. Frank?"

Relief flooded through her as she nodded.

He came right up to her then. Tall and broad-shouldered, he loomed over her, making her feel insignificant. "*You're* Mrs. Frank?"

"That's right." She extended her hand his way. "Thank you for meeting me."

He stared at her hand as if unsure of what to do next. Perhaps folks didn't offer a hand to their intended in this part of the country. With seeming reluctance, his gloved hand barely grazed the tips of her fingers. His eyes were coal dark and unreadable, his mouth unsmiling, giving her the sense she had done something wrong. A coldness chased through her and squeezed air from her lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

"I thought you'd be older," he said gruffly, as he bent down and retrieved her valise from her other hand. "You sounded older in your letters."

Ah! Mrs. Alders, from the church, had helped her with her wording and the old dear was seventy if she was a day, so that made sense.

"I see." She had no idea what else to say.

"Kind of young to be a widow, aren't you?"

"The Lord is not always discriminating in who he calls to be with him," Talia retorted.

"Can't argue that." He guided her from the train station to a dusty street jammed with conveyances of various forms, from carriages to wagons to horses with riders. "It's always busy when the train arrives."

Talia refrained from telling him that his idea of busy was nothing compared to what she'd left behind. "I lived near the docks," she said. "Hustle and bustle are nothing new to me."

"I expect you'll find Ridgemont an adjustment. Not many years back there was nothing there but bush."

"Is there at least a church?"

He nodded. "Built last year. The reverend travels around the county, manages to get there most Sundays." He pointed across the street. "That's the office of the Justice of the Peace. Got him all lined

up to marry us."

Talia stopped abruptly. "No."

Her companion paused and turned to face her. "No, what?"

"No, I am not being married by a Justice of the Peace. Our union will take place in the house of the Lord, and I'll hear no more on the matter."

Talia held her breath, wondering where those words had come from, and how the sheriff would react. But even if theirs wasn't to be a real marriage, it deserved the Lord's blessing.

A half-smile tugged at one side of the sheriff's mouth, making him appear younger and less formidable.

"That's the way of things then, is it?"

"Sheriff Holmes, I—"

"Weston," he said gently. "I think it would be best if you get used to calling me by my given name."

Talia nodded and swallowed, relieved he hadn't been offended by her outburst. "Nice to meet you, Weston. As you know, my name is Talia."

"A pretty name for a pretty lady," Weston said. "You got any more surprises for me?"

"I certainly hope so," she said primly.

He laughed aloud then, showing a row of even white teeth. "I think you'll get along real well with my best friend's wife. And if she was standing here right now, that lady would just shake her head in that way she has and say, "I told you so, Weston."

"What did she tell you?"

"That I was treating this union too much like a business arrangement." His voice softened. "How long were you married before you were widowed?"

"Five years," she said.

"Mind if I ask how he died?"

"Needlessly, in a drunken brawl in a tavern after work. The man who killed him spent one night in jail, before it was deemed an accident."

"Small comfort," Weston said, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "It's hard to lose someone you love."

"I did love him," Talia said quickly. "But not the way I had hoped, for he was more like an annoying younger brother. We grew up next door, our parents took for granted we'd marry one day, and neither of us had the heart to disappoint them."

She bit her lip abruptly. "I'm sorry, I'm not usually such a chatterbox."

Weston hefted her valise into the back of a buckboard wagon. "That's okay, Talia. Marriage is new to me, so it sounds like we both

have a lot to learn about each other."

~

WESTON HELPED his bride-to-be into her seat before he swung himself next to her and picked up the reins. As they started to move, he snuck a sideways look at her. She was a pretty little thing, with her unusual cascade of red-gold hair and eyes the color of the desert sky just before sunset. Nothing like he'd expected those church ladies to choose for him.

Taking a wife to help gain respect in the eyes of the town he served might seem like an extreme measure, but it was one he was okay with, as long as he wasn't the one doing the choosing. His one foray in that area had regrettable consequences, for his intended had turned out to be a con woman, in cahoots with the man who killed his parents, only there to keep him from discovering the killer while her lover got away.

He sighed, remembering his folks and the way his ma knew what his pa thought or needed even before Pa did. The Lord's work Pa had done with his wife alongside him. "Every successful man needs a good woman at his side," Pa had often said, as he smiled at Weston's ma. Was it asking too much to hope that Talia might prove to be that woman for him? A woman he could count on, without all the fuss and bother of romantic entanglements to muddy things up?

He spent the trip to Ridgemont filling her in about the town that was going to be her new home. "My friend, Shane Blackman, first saw the area some years back. Took a shine to the place and had this vision for a town there. A safe and prosperous place for folks to call home."

Talia listened with rapt attention, and the fact that she was interested in him and his life here warmed his innards. "The crew finally finished building me an office here in town, and I just got moved in. That's where you'll come in. Counting on you to help me get things organized there."

"Are you the only lawman in these parts?"

"West of Durango I am. Up to now, things have been pretty peaceful. Shane hired me to see it stays that way."

"Why would anything change?"

Weston pressed his lips in a thin line and took his time with his answer. "Shane's wife, Lacey Blackman, grew up in an area where racing horses was a popular pastime. Her and Shane had a thought the sport could catch on here as well. Brings a lot of work into the area. Makes it a good place to raise a family."

"But—?"

“Men have been gambling since long before the first group of settlers headed this way, and hard work has its own rewards. But there’s always the folks who are looking to get rich quick.”

Talia nodded.

“Don’t get me wrong. A place like Ridgemont Downs sees its share of honest folks. But the prospect of easy money always attracts a few undesirables.”

She tilted her head. “Crooks and criminals?”

“To name a few. The track’s been open for two years, and as word spreads, the place just keeps getting busier.”

When they reached Ridgemont, Talia’s head bobbed this way and that and he tried to see the town through her eyes, one narrow dusty road without so much as a sidewalk fronting the new businesses that had sprung up like mushrooms these last few years. Buildings first. Sidewalks would follow.

“You weren’t exaggerating when you said there’s not much here.”

He felt duty bound to defend his town. “Give it time. The place is growing fast. Which is why Shane hired me to keep the law.” He took a breath. “Say so now if you want out.”

She lifted her chin. “One thing you’ll come to learn about me is that I never go back on my word.” He saw the hint of a shadow in her eyes as she spoke, which left him wondering about the husband that she claimed had been more like a brother. Did the man spend the night with his mates in the tavern instead of at home with his wife? He hoped she wouldn’t turn out to be one of those needy young women he spotted around here from time to time. Usually, it was only a matter of time before those types hightailed it back to where they came from.

“You said you need someone to help you, and I’m grateful for this opportunity. A man working the right side of the law shouldn’t have to work alone.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll find not all lawmen can be trusted equally. I’ve met a few who were criminals first. And others who use the law for their own means.” He’d turned in his badge for that very reason, before Shane offered him a chance to do things his way. The right way.

Talia nodded. “Anything else I ought to know before we say our vows?”

He cleared his throat, taken aback by her direct way of speaking. “Just that you’ll find there are a lot of men in the West. And easy enough to get an annulment or divorce, should you decide down the road that someone else strikes your fancy.”

Her eyes widened. “We’re not even married and already you’re talking divorce?”

He thought, he hoped, he saw a teasing glint in her eye, not a calculating one.

"Just so we're clear," he said gruffly. "In case neither of us suits the other. I won't hold you back." He waved a hand. "Town's boarding house is over this way. Let's get you settled, then I'll head to the church and find out when the reverend is expected." Weston stopped the wagon outside a plain-looking house next to a saloon. A sign in the window read 'rooms for rent.'

"I'm sorry to have to leave you here," he added. "I anticipated we'd have exchanged vows by now and you'd be coming home with me. But such an arrangement wouldn't be seemly until we're wed."

Chapter 2

Talia masked her dismay at being left where she didn't know a soul, for she had never been more than a few miles from where she'd been born.

Weston helped her down from the wagon and set her valise on the porch. "You needn't worry that I'll up and leave you here," he said. "I made a commitment and I aim to hold up my end of the deal."

A half-smile twitched the corners of her mouth. "Are you implying I shouldn't start shopping around to see if there's a better prospect out there for me?"

His eyes flashed with a sudden, possessive look that took her by surprise and thrilled her clear down to her toes. When she tilted her head up for a better look, her heart pounded in her chest, for no man had ever looked at her that way before. As if she was his woman and woe to anyone who tried to come between them.

He took a half step closer, and for one mad second, she thought he might kiss her. But the moment passed. She reminded herself theirs would be a name-only marriage, something they'd both agreed, even as she wondered what a real marriage might feel like. Especially with this man in front of her, who was by turns gruff, then gentle, serious, then teasing.

~

THE OWNER of the boarding house took pity on her being the only woman and brought a tray of food to her room, along with a jug of wash water. As she ate, she glanced around the bare walls of a small room that contained the bare essentials: a narrow, sagging bed with a rumpled blanket and a flat pillow, a straight back chair, small bureau and a night stand. She was no stranger to being alone since Mick died, but it had always been in familiar surroundings.

Meal finished, she peeled out of her outer garments, splashed some water on her face, too tired to even brush and braid her hair before she lay down and closed her eyes. Tired or not, she expected sleep to be a long time coming, for her brain was churning with unanswered

questions about the new life she was starting.

~

WESTON FOUND the curate around back of the church. The man told him the reverend was expected the next morning, and obligingly booked their exchange of vows for the afternoon.

Next, he stopped by his friends' ranch to ask Shane and Lacey if they were free to join him at the church the following day and witness his union to the widow.

"You left her in town at that nasty boarding house?" Lacey said. "Why didn't you bring her here?"

"I took her to the first place that came to mind," Weston said defensively. "How was I to know she'd insist on a church wedding?"

Lacey shook her head. She did that a lot around him. "Didn't you find her through a church group that knew your father years back?"

Weston grunted. Lacey had a point.

"I was only half serious when I suggested a wife would give you a little more respectability around town."

"No, you were right," Weston said, recalling his pa's words. "Folks tend to look askance at an unmarried lawman. Even around here. I expect you and her will get along like a house on fire," he added.

"A shame it's too late to go fetch her from the boarding house," Lacey said, "but I'll head over there tomorrow and make sure the poor thing has a proper welcome."

~

TALIA BARELY SLEPT A WINK. The boarding house walls were paper thin and whenever she drifted off, she was soon wakened by the banging of a nearby door or footsteps stumbling past her room. She heard her door knob rattle a time or two, or thought she did, but she'd pushed the bureau against her door the way Weston had told her.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face; concern darkening his gaze as he left her at the boarding house with a promise to return the next day.

By the time dawn light seeped through the threadbare curtains at the lone window, she'd given up all pretext at sleep and was up and dressed in her one decent frock, the same one she'd worn the last time she'd exchanged vows with a man. The blue cotton had faded over time due to countless wearings and washings, but she vainly thought the color brought out the blue of her eyes. The frock also cinched her waist and made the most of her slender shape, which she hoped Weston found pleasing, for she wasn't ample in the hips or the bosom

like a lot of other women, but wispy thin, more like a sapling than a sturdy tree.

She eyed herself in the mottled looking glass as she pinned up her hair and draped her shawl, her most prized possession, across her shoulders. It was a pretty fringed brocade, a gift from the church ladies when she set off on her new adventure. She made a half turn. Was it wrong to hope her soon-to-be husband found her pleasing to the eye?

Weston had told her annulment or divorce were easy enough should she ever want out, but she wasn't about to enter marriage with that in mind. To her, marriage was sacred, a 'till death do us part' commitment. She didn't know Weston well yet, but felt he was a kind and honorable man. A penniless widow could do a lot worse than hitch her wagon to his in this raw and untamed land.

She waited in her room until the house was quiet, signaling the other boarders had left for the day, then ventured downstairs. A striking, dark-haired woman was sitting on the bench in the front hall and looked up with a welcoming smile before she rose.

"Talia. I'm Sheriff Holmes's friend, Lacey Blackman. Welcome to Ridgemont."

Fear leapt into her throat, flavors of the past when a stranger arrived to inform her of Mick's passing. "I don't understand. Where's Weston? Has something happened?"

Lacey gave her glossy dark head a shake. "I reminded him it's bad luck for the groom to see his bride before the wedding."

"Oh—"

"So here I am to help you get ready before we head for the church. Do you have everything you need?"

Seeing Lacey's smart, fashionable attire, Talia was suddenly conscious of her worn and faded gown. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be," she said, relieved when Lacey didn't pull a face at her gown's shortcomings.

"Well, the reverend hasn't arrived yet, which means we have time to get to know each other." Lacey cocked her head. "I'm betting you could use a cup of tea."

"If it's not too much trouble," Talia said hesitantly.

"There's a tea room at the far end of town," Lacey said. "Come with me, I'll give you the nickel tour on the way. Weston said to leave your bag here and he'll pick it up on his way to the church." Talia glanced down at her worn valise, its meagre contents all she had to her name, before she followed the other woman out into the sunshine. The far end of town proved to be a stone's throw away.

"What do you think of Ridgemont so far?" Lacey asked, once they were settled in the tea room.

"I—it's quite small compared to where I come from."

Lacey laughed. "Politely put. Trust me, there was little or nothing here when I arrived. It still doesn't look like much, but the area is starting to get settled, and the town along with it. Shane, my husband, has some illustrious plans for Ridgemont's future."

"Weston said something about a race track," Talia said.

"My family has raised and raced horses in Pennsylvania for several generations," Lacey said. "I didn't see any reason why the sport shouldn't catch on here. Build it and they will come, so to speak."

"*You* built a race track?"

"Shane and I. Two years ago. I have a fleet of horses and jockeys, and folks come from all over to see what's going on and try their luck at the betting window. More and more breeders and trainers are coming this way to see how their horses fare against mine." Lacey pointed through the window to where a wooden structure, much too large to be a family dwelling, was currently being constructed. "Soon the town will have a hotel and a decent restaurant, along with a school."

"Do you have children?" Talia asked. She was an only child, but always thought it would be nice to have a child of her own one day. The occasional, awkward encounter with Mick before they decided it was bad idea hadn't fulfilled that dream.

"A toddler," Lacey said. "But judging how quickly he's growing it won't be long before he's dashing out the door to his lessons."

"I hope I get the chance to meet him," Talia said, wistfully. "I like youngsters."

"Oh, you will. We're your nearest neighbors. In fact, Weston's cabin is on the back side or our horse ranch." She pulled a face. "Weston didn't tell you anything, did he? Typical man. Speaking of men— Hello, Mr. Lewis."

A well-dressed gentleman in a frock coat and top hat was bearing down on their table. "Mrs. Blackman. I thought that was you. What a bright start to my day."

Lacey rolled her eyes, but the newcomer didn't appear to notice. All his attention was directed toward Talia. "And who is your enchanting companion?"

"This is Mrs. Frank. Soon to become Mrs. Holmes." Lacey rose. "And on that happy note, we must be off before the poor groom fears his intended had a change of heart."

"Or found herself swept away by one of this town's lonely, eligible bachelors." The man's eyes held Talia's as he spoke.

Lacey rose and stepped between them. "Come on, Talia. The reverend was expected a while ago. Weston is probably pacing by now."

“I didn’t expect Western men to be so polished,” Talia said as they made their way out to the street.

“Most aren’t. Marvin Lewis is a bit of a dandy who found his way here, thanks to my brother raving about the opportunities around every corner. Lewis doesn’t seem to do much with his time besides hang about at the race track.”

Outside the tiny new church on the outskirts of town, Talia recognized Weston’s serviceable wooden wagon parked next to a fancy rig drawn by a good-looking pair of matching gray horses. When they reached the vehicles, Lacey reached behind the seat of the fancy carriage and pulled out an armful of fresh flowers.

“Here you go,” she said cheerfully. “Every bride needs a bouquet on her big day.” Her eyes narrowed as she stepped back. “Your frock is blue, and can also be your something old. It looks perfect underneath your lovely shawl. Is that new?”

Talia stroked the soft fabric. “It was a gift from my friends.”

“Good, all you need is something borrowed. Here.” As Lacey spoke, she slipped a heavy gold bracelet off her wrist and clasped it around Talia’s. “All set.” She paused, her eyes resting gently on Talia. “Are you nervous?”

Talia swallowed thickly. “About to marry a man I barely know? And live on the other side of the country?”

Lacey gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. “You’re very brave. I knew Shane for years before he and I were wed, and I still wondered what I had taken on, moving this far from home. Rest assured, Weston is a good man. He quit the law once, disillusioned by life’s injustices, but he came back when Shane asked him to. He’s a firm believer in justice.”

Talia nodded, and clung tightly to the bunched flowers that were tied with a satin ribbon, trying to disguise the sudden tremor of her hands. To her, matrimony was sacred and she wondered if the Lord was watching her in disappointment as she prepared to wed a man who wanted a wife in name only.

Chapter 3

The ceremony was short and to the point. And now Weston was a married man, his bride sitting quietly next to him on the hard, wooden wagon seat as they drove to his home. *Their* home, he corrected himself. A cabin at the far back side of Shane and Lacey's ranch that he figured had been the original homestead before the bigger house was built. The place had been empty before he took it over, and a bit derelict, but Shane had fixed it up some, even installed a pump at the sink so he didn't have to haul water from the well. Lacey partly furnished it before he arrived, giving it a woman's touch with curtains at the bedroom windows and a rocking chair on the front porch.

As they pulled up, he watched Talia's expression, but her face remained unreadable. She hadn't said two words since the church.

"It's small but it's serviceable," he said, refusing to apologize for the cabin's shabby exterior. And maybe one day, now that he was married, he'd see his way clear to build that house of his dreams with a big front porch and a creek running through the back yard. A house that wouldn't feel so temporary, the way this cabin did.

"It's quiet here," was all she said. "Peaceful."

He'd give her that. He dragged her valise in and showed her to the room earmarked as hers, the nicest room in the house. Again, her expression was hard to read. He wondered if most couples' marriages were one long silence after another.

~

As difficult as it was to think he was no longer a bachelor, it was even more difficult to believe he was spending his wedding night poring over notes and diagrams of Ridgemont Downs that he'd recently borrowed from Shane, his wife by his side. But since her chat earlier with Lacey, Talia had expressed keen interest in the project, and seemed anxious to get a good sense of her new home and the surrounding area.

"This is the stable area. Shane and Lacey secured the services of a

fulltime veterinarian, along with the stable hands and grooms who all keep the place running smoothly. For the first while, the races were more of a curiosity to folks traveling through. That all changed last year with a new betting system. Now horse breeders come from all around the country to enter their horses in specific races, and folks from all walks of life show up hoping to take home big winnings."

"I take it Lacey and her husband are well-to-do?"

"Lacey comes from old family money out East. Shane's a self-made man thanks to some rich mining claims. My guess is the race track's helping make them richer. It also supplies a lot of jobs, and Shane's invested in Ridgemont's future."

"I like Lacey," Talia said. "She seems very down to earth, not stuck on herself one bit."

"That's her, all right."

Just then he noticed Talia's eyes, normally big and bright, were starting to drift closed. When she swayed toward him, he acted on instinct, his arms closing around her tiny frame and holding her. She started in his arms and her eyes flew open to fasten on his.

He kept a firm grip, feeling he had something fragile and delicate in his possession. "I'm a lout," he said. "You're all but falling asleep on your feet while I drone on."

"It's interesting," Talia said, smothering a yawn with the back of one slim, white hand. "But I'm afraid I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Or all the nights previous while you were riding the train, I'll wager."

She pressed her soft pink lips together in an endearing way, and nodded.

Weston cleared his throat, a pleasant warmth rippling through him where her body brushed his. "I'll try not to be so thoughtless again. And if I am, I fully expect you to put me in my place right smartly."

To his surprise she rested her hand on his shoulder. "Have many women had to put you in your place, Weston?"

He blanched, not sure what she was asking. "It's my belief women are gentle creatures and deserve to be treated accordingly."

"Most of us are tougher than we look." Her words spoke to an underlying strength that was at odds with her appearance.

"That ought to make us a good team."

"A good team," she echoed, the sentiment cut off by another yawn.

"Can you manage on your own, or do you need a hand?" he asked gruffly.

She fingered a button on the front of his shirt. "Why do I get the feeling you haven't listened to a thing I've said? Night, night, Weston." And she slipped from his arms and headed off to the room

next to his.

Once she left, he rolled up the papers. It would take some getting used to, having a woman in the house. He wondered how other men managed it.

~

TALIA WAS WAKENED the next day by a soft knock at her bedroom door, followed by Weston's voice. "Talia, are you awake?"

Oh no! Had she overslept?

Talia sat up in bed and pulled the edges of her night shirt up around her neck, feeling silly. She'd been married before. A man in her bedroom, her husband no less, was hardly a scandalous act.

"Come in," she called.

Weston peered around the edge of the door as it swung open slowly, as if unsure of his reception. He was carrying a small tray set with a teapot, a cup and saucer, cream jug and sugar bowl. "I thought you might enjoy a cup of tea," he said hesitantly. "I remember my father used to always take one in to my mother in the morning."

"How thoughtful."

"I'll just put it here." Weston set the tray on the bureau next to the wash basin, looking everywhere but at her. "I take it the room and furnishings are adequate for your needs?"

"More than adequate," Talia said. The room was far more spacious than where she had lived before, the appointments opulent, with a polished dark wood bureau, armoire and night stand. The bed boasted a satin-edged coverlet and crisp sheets. "You have a lovely home."

"I'm afraid it's bachelor digs for the most part." He opened and closed his mouth a few times as if there was more he wanted to say.

"It's much nicer than any other place I've lived." Obviously, she'd said the right thing because his face lit up.

"The furniture in here belonged to my parents, and I couldn't bring myself to part with it when they passed."

She waited expectantly, sensing he had more to say.

"I'm not sure how this being married stuff works, so I'll count on you to guide me. Lacey and Shane have invited some of the neighbors over later today to help welcome you to town. I hope that's all right with you."

"That's most kind of them," Talia said.

He nodded. "I'll see you downstairs when you're ready."

The second the door closed behind him, Talia jumped out of bed and peered at her reflection in the cheval mirror. Random wisps of hair had escaped her braid overnight and stuck out from her head in a haphazard manner. She stuck out her tongue. Weston wasn't

interested in her as a woman, so why should her appearance matter? Except she wanted to do him proud in the eyes of the townsfolk.

She was grateful for not only a fresh start in a new part of the country, but also the chance to feel useful by helping her sheriff husband any way she could.

"I'm not much of a cook," Weston said apologetically, when she arrived in the kitchen a short time later. He slid a plate toward her with a lightly charred slice of toast next to two eggs congealing in a puddle of melted lard. "I never mastered the art of getting different things ready to eat at the same time without some of it being cold or overcooked."

"Thank you for your trouble," Talia said. "Perhaps if I lend a hand with the meals we can manage together."

He took a seat across from her and unfolded his napkin. He looked troubled as he stirred sugar into his coffee. She hoped he wasn't having second thoughts already. She spooned a chunk of egg onto a wedge of toast as she strove to find something to say. Weston continued to eat in silence and she guessed this was his morning routine, no doubt deep in thought about work.

"Tell me about your parents," she said finally, as the silence stretched. "The furniture you inherited from them is lovely."

"Not much to tell. Pa was a preacher. Ma was his partner and best friend. I had no brothers or sisters, and to tell the truth I always felt like a bit of third wheel around them. Sometimes they'd look at me like they wondered who I was or where I'd come from."

Talia laughed. "I think most parents feel that way from time to time. Like their children are strangers."

"Pa was always helping those down on their luck. One night I came home and found the two of them had been killed and all of their valuables missing. Local sheriff had no leads." He shrugged. "I decided then and there that I'd go about things different, helping folks in a different way. Seeing the good people stay safe and the criminals get what's coming to them."

"I understand you feeling that way. My husband's killer getting off scot-free was a serious mistrial of justice."

"I don't mean to sound forward, but you don't strike me as the type to be working as a barmaid, like you said in your letters."

"It was never my choice. But after my husband died, the owner of the tavern showed up with a stack of notes owing, signed by Mick. He gave me the choice of working it off or going to jail." She spread butter on a toast triangle. "I saw a lot of things down there that I'd rather not have seen." She met his gaze squarely. "I'm looking forward to helping you."

After they'd eaten, Talia heated water on the stove and shooed

Weston out of the kitchen. “I’m going to see to these dishes and have a bath so I don’t scare away the folks I’m about to meet. I’m sure you have things outside in need of your attention.”

Weston nodded. “You’ll find your way around okay?”

“I’ll give a holler if I run into anything I can’t deal with.”

He paused in the doorway. “Do you ride?”

She shook her head.

“Can you drive a wagon?”

“I expect I could if I had to.”

He nodded. “I’ll get you something small and easy to handle so you can get around on your own.” He paused again. “Can you shoot?”

Talia placed her hands on her hips. “Weston, you’re making me feel woefully inadequate for my life here. Trust me, I can learn whatever needs learning.”

~

SHE’D SOUNDED confident when she’d faced off with Weston earlier, far more confident than she felt. And her confidence ebbed further when they arrived at the event next door, being thrown in their honor. As they drove toward the ranch house, they passed dozens upon dozens of buggies and wagons lining the side of the drive.

She turned to face Weston. “I thought you said I’d be meeting a few neighbors.”

He shrugged. “Shane and Lacey know pretty much everybody in these parts. And word has a way of spreading. I’m guessing they didn’t want to leave anyone out.”

“Do you know all these people?”

“Doubt it,” Weston said. “I mostly tend to keep to myself.”

“What are we doing here, then?”

He smiled. “Giving folks their first look-see at my beautiful bride.”

Talia flushed, not only from the compliment, but from the admiring look in her new husband’s eye. “Am I right to think that many will be surprised by the sudden change in your bachelor status?”

He helped her from the wagon and smiled again before he tucked her arm through his. “Jealous is more like it.”

“Are you sure you haven’t done something like this before?” she asked. “You’re awfully smooth. Tea in my room. Breakfast ready and waiting. Showering me with compliments.”

Did a brief shadow pass through his eyes before he spoke? “You deserve nice things, along with being well-treated. I can’t give you hearts and flowers, but as long as you’re my wife, I can promise you respect.”

His words gave Talia pause. Not that she expected hearts and flowers, but she wondered what happened in his past to leave Weston so adamantly against a traditional marriage?

Lacey had obviously been watching for them, for she reached their side minutes later as Talia was trying to take it all in. Musicians played in the background, adding to the overall air of festivity. Several men manned an oversized contraption that was wreathed in smoke. When they lifted the lid, the smell of cooking meat made its way through the crowd.

"Just because you're newlyweds, doesn't mean you can hog your new wife all to yourself, Sheriff," Lacey said, with a conspiratorial wink at Talia.

Talia could have sworn Weston's ears reddened slightly. "Didn't know I was. Anyway, we're here now."

"Finally." Lacey linked her arm through Talia's as she addressed Weston. "Most of the men are over there, intent on setting a new record for emptying the beer keg. Why don't you go help them and leave us ladies to make the rounds?"

Talia felt a pang as she watched Weston walk away. "I had no idea there would be so many people. You must have gone to a lot of trouble."

Lacey waved a hand through the air. "No trouble. More like practice for when Shane and I renew our vows. Come with me. I'll do my best to keep the nosy gossips at arm's length. Everyone will want to know everything about you. Where you come from, who your people are. Don't feel you have to answer everything they ask."

Talia swallowed. There wasn't a whole lot in her past she was keen to share.

Chapter 4

Weston couldn't help it as he eyed each of the men gathered around the keg suspiciously, for he'd recently come across information outlining a crime in the planning stages out at the race track. Rumored to be an inside job, with help from several others. The cashiers in the gaming hall all checked out, no skeletons in their closet that he could find. Was one of his neighbors in cahoots to commit a criminal act?

"Holmes, you sly dog!" Smith, a neighboring rancher, slapped him on the back in a friendly way. "Snagged yourself not only a wife, but a right comely one at that."

Weston bobbed his head in acknowledgement. Talia *was* a beauty. If anything, he wished she was a little less so, for someone with Talia's looks would always be noticed.

"I wager your bride is giving more than a few of us bachelors some serious thought to importing a wife from out East."

"Pah!" said a grizzled ranch hand as he spat a stream of tobacco onto the ground. "See how long a wife lasts when you try to plant a hot house flower in the desert. Odds are she'll be gone within the year."

"I'll take those odds," said a third man. "Only let's make it interesting." Weston's gaze found Shane's. Men in the West had been gambling in one form or another as long as they'd been here. In fact, the very act of them being here at all was one big gamble.

Weston knew what Shane was thinking. The organized gambling out at the race track was a way to control the activity, see the wagers and payouts stayed fair, at the same time it provided jobs and entertainment, which in turn attracted more folks to the area. More than once, he'd been tempted to share his information with Shane, but didn't want to burden his friend when keeping things around here lawful was his job. Besides, he was duty-bound to protect the identity of his source

"Did I hear you and Lacey are planning to renew your vows?" he asked.

"Lacey does love an excuse for a party. I guess our being married

by proxy wasn't the most romantic occurrence in her world."

"Myself, I was always relieved not to see you swinging at the end of a hangman's noose."

"That makes two of us."

Weston had first met Shane when the newly successful miner was wrongfully jailed and scheduled to hang for his alleged crimes. That near miscarriage of justice had been the tipping point to drive him from the job of upholding the law, and he wouldn't have come back to the role of sheriff for anyone besides Shane.

Weston inclined his head to where Marvin Lewis held court across the way. "Man sure does love an audience. He's friends with your brother-in-law, right?"

"Apparently he was like that back East as well. Lacey never met him, but she remembers hearing stories about him."

Again, Weston considered confiding in Shane, but he couldn't take the chance on a leak. His informant's life depended on it. Shane was also really protective of the race track he and Lacey started from nothing more than a dream. From what Weston could tell, Shane's vision for the town and the people here was sound, as long as the place didn't get overtaken by the wrong type.

A glass of beer in hand, he left Shane and made the rounds, as was expected of a public official, accepting congratulations and well wishes as he went. Was it his imagination, or did folks eye him with a new level of respect now that he was a married man?

It seemed everyone from miles around was in attendance. He knew most of them on sight, and more than a handful by name. There was a comfortable, celebratory air, and it was nice to see newcomers chatting with folks who had been here a while, shop owners alongside landowners. Meanwhile, kids ran and played, dodging between guests or hiding under the long tables where several of the local ladies were laying out food.

He snuck a glance at his timepiece wondering how soon before he and Talia could leave. He wasn't much of one for parties at the best of times, especially not when he was guest of honor. Speaking of guests of honor, it was high time he went to check on his wife.

He spotted her talking to Nellie, the local seamstress, and hung back, reluctant to intrude on what was clearly a ladies' type discussion.

Marvin Lewis apparently had no such qualms, for the man strolled confidently toward the pair, clearly anticipating a warm welcome. Instantly the focus shifted. Nellie appeared flustered and took her leave moments later, so Talia was alone with Lewis. Weston gritted his teeth as Lewis took a step closer, placed his arm on Talia's shoulder in an overly familiar fashion, and lowered his face toward hers as if they

were the only two people here.

What did he expect? He'd told her he'd never hold her to their name-only marriage. He tried to ignore the deep stab of jealousy cutting through him like a knife as he turned and walked away. It was a feeling he'd hoped to never experience again in this lifetime.

~

TALIA WAS RELIEVED when Weston approached and told her it was time to go. Much as she appreciated the efforts undertaken by Lacey and Shane, she'd never been one for crowds.

"You're quiet," Weston said as he guided their wagon down the driveway and out onto the street.

"I guess I'm all talked out," Talia said.

"Saw you talking to Lewis, earlier."

Did she detect a funny note in Weston's voice? "The man loves to hear himself," Talia said. "He was telling me a little about Ridgemont Downs. How far away is the track?"

"Next valley over. It was the closest tract of land Shane could find that was flat enough to build a decent-sized race track."

They reached the cabin and he parked the rig and unhitched the horse. Talia followed him into the barn as he tended to the animal. "And when do my duties as your assistant officially start?"

"Whenever you feel up to it, I suppose. I'll take you to the office tomorrow if you like."

"I am anxious to get started and to make myself useful. Speaking of useful—I found out from some of the mothers with young children there today that there are no Sunday school classes being taught."

"I wasn't aware, but if that's what you heard, I suppose it's correct."

She cocked her head. "Would you mind terribly if I volunteered?"

Weston blanched. "To teach Sunday school? Whatever for?"

"For one, I'm qualified. I used to fill in for the regular teacher in Brooklyn when she couldn't make it. For another, it will give me the chance to meet more of the townsfolk."

"Go ahead then," he said. "If you're of a mind."

She blinked up sweetly at him. "I want to be part of your world here, Weston. And make it my world as well."

He filled up the horse's feed trough. "There hasn't been much church-going in my world these days, and hasn't been since my parents were killed. But, if it pleases you to teach Sunday school, you should do that."

She had no idea what prompted her to go to him, place her arms around him, and pressed a sweet kiss to his cheek. "Thank you."

"No need to be thanking me."

"Indeed there is. Not only did you give me this fresh start, you've given me a chance to feel useful."

~

TALIA'S THOUGHTS spun through her head as she got ready for bed that evening. She'd shocked herself earlier in the barn when she'd pressed a kiss to Weston's cheek. Even more shocking was the realization that she wanted to touch him; reaching out to him physically felt like the most natural thing in the world. She'd seen him earlier today, when she was talking to Mr. Lewis, and got a thrill when she thought she detected a jealous frown before he turned away.

She was just sliding between the sheets, which felt cold and lonely, when she heard a knock at the cabin's front door, followed by the creak of Weston's bedroom door opening and his footfalls in the hallway. She scrambled from bed and into her wrap. By the time she reached his side, whoever had been at the door was gone. Weston stood shirtless, in loose britches, and she had difficulty pulling her gaze from his chest, with its soft dark matting of hair, to his face, etched with worry.

"What is it?"

"Something I need to go check out. Sheriff business. You go back to bed."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

He gave his head a terse shake and strode toward his bedroom. He returned minutes later in a buttoned up checked shirt with a vest overtop, his gun holstered on his hip, a shotgun in one hand.

For the first time, she was struck not only by the danger of his job, but the fact that, like Mick, her husband may never come home. And she had to let him go.

"Godspeed," she said.

He picked up his hat which was pegged near the door. "Get some sleep. I'll be back as soon as I can."

For a second, she hoped he might pull her near to kiss her goodbye, and took a half step toward him, just as he stepped back, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

"Lock the door behind me. Don't open it to anyone. And I mean, *no one*."

She nodded, knowing she wouldn't be able to sleep a wink until he was back safely.

~

WESTON SQUATTED next to the lifeless body of Nellie, the town's seamstress, who lived in back of her neat, tidy shop. The woman was dressed as if ready to pop out any minute, which he found unusual, given the late hour. Wilks, Nellie's next door neighbor, stood a short distance away, his rumpled nightshirt partly tucked into his britches, his hat in his hands and a look of shock and sorrow on his face.

"Who would do such a thing to an innocent woman?"

"Good question." Weston rose slowly, feeling every one of his thirty plus years. It was far from being his first dead body, but the sight never got any easier. Especially since he had a fair idea why Nellie had been killed.

"Tell me again, what you told me earlier," he said, as he pulled a notepad from his shirt pocket.

"Sound of a gunshot woke me up. Just one. At first, I thought it must be some drunk coming out of the saloon, that happens around here from time to time. I got up and looked up and down the street, but didn't see anything. The wife's the one who told me I should check on Nellie, woman living alone and all. I came in the shop's front door and saw her straight away, lying here exactly as she is, so I came to get you. Then, like you told me, I came right back and waited."

"The door wasn't locked?"

"No, sir. In fact, it wasn't quite closed tight, as if someone had left in a hurry."

Weston would take a closer look come daylight, but it didn't appear to have been a forced entry. Which meant Nellie knew her killer. Maybe even expected them.

"Thanks, Wilks. You can head back now and reassure the missus."

"Ridgemont is a peaceful place for the most part. We moved here because of that."

Weston nodded. "First time a woman's been killed around here on my watch. Hoping it's the last."

"Think she might have interrupted a robbery?"

Weston doubted it. "Hard to say until I finish my investigation. Once I'm done here, I'll go wake up the undertaker. Do you happen to know if she has any next-of-kin?"

"The missus might know. Women tend to talk more about stuff like that."

Weston nodded. "Tell your wife to expect me some time tomorrow. Maybe she knows someone I should contact. And Wilks, appreciate it if you and the missus keep this to yourselves as long as possible. Word'll get out soon enough. Be nice if we had someone behind bars before that happens. Reassure folks that they're safe here."

"Hard to believe it could have been someone local."

"At this point, we don't know who's responsible, and I'm not about

to speculate. Just do me a favor and keep an eye peeled for anyone acting different from usual."

Wilks nodded as he left.

Weston stared down at Nellie, regret pulsing through him as he wondered how he might have prevented this from happening.

Chapter 5

Talia barely slept a wink, and dawn was pinkening the sky before she got up to start the fire and put on the coffee. Not long after, she heard Weston's key in the lock and sprang to her feet. He was barely through the cabin's front door before she launched herself at him. He caught her and did a two-step to keep them both from keeling over backwards.

"Here, here, what's all this?" he said, patting her on the back as she clung to him.

"I'm just so glad you're back safely."She worried her bottom lip as he put her from him gently, laid aside his rifle on the hall table and unfastened his holster belt. There was a heavy clunk as it joined his rifle.

"I'm not usually so emotional," she said. "It's just—you being called away like that. It reminded me of the night Mick didn't come home."

"I'm the sheriff. Middle-of-the-night calls are part of the job. No need to worry." Without another word he marched into his room and shut the door.

Talia stared at the solid wood door panel for several long minutes before she approached the door and knocked.

Weston opened it seconds later. "You need something?"

"Yes. I need you to tell me what happened that you were summoned out in the middle of the night."

He pursed his lips and for a second she thought he wasn't going to answer. "It was nothing."

She reached between them and smoothed his brow. "*Nothing* doesn't cause this deep furrow between your eyes."

He caught and held her hand, effectively preventing her from touching him. As he did, the paper he was holding fluttered to the ground between them. He let her go and stooped to retrieve it, but she beat him to it. As she rose with what looked to be a ripped-in-half telegram, he snatched the paper from her.

"Weston. What's going on?"

"I told you earlier. Sheriff business."

She eyed him closely. “Did your father ever discuss preacher business with your mother?’

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “All the time.”

“Is this so different?”

“It is when a woman in my town turns up dead.”

Talia swallowed a gasp. Kept her voice even. “I made coffee earlier. I believe we could both use a cup.”

She fixed Weston’s coffee the way he liked it, black and sweet, and sat across from him at the dining table. He took a couple of sips and nodded his approval.

“You’re right. I needed this.”

She clasped her hands on the table in front of her and tamped down her impatience. He took another sip before he looked up, his dark, troubled gaze meeting hers.

“You know, if I’m going to help you, you need to not keep me in the dark.”

“Sometimes the world outside that door is dark and dangerous.”

“Weston, I faced danger every single day in a neighborhood where life is cheap, never mind working in the tavern where my late husband was killed.” She looked up at him. “Up until now, I always thought men perpetrated injustice and women were the only ones who cared, or tried to make things right. It was refreshing to learn you feel the same way, focused on making the world a better place. That’s how I know this union is meant to be, guided by the Lord’s hand.”

“I wouldn’t be giving all the credit to the Lord,” Weston said gruffly.

Weston’s words saddened her. A preacher’s son, she wondered if he had seen so much injustice in the world that he had lost his faith. Then she straightened her shoulders. It would be up to her to help restore Weston’s faith in the Almighty. Maybe that was the real reason she had been guided here.

“You know I’ll find out what happened tonight, one way or another.”

He blew out a pained breath.

“A lady in town was killed.”

“And not by accident.”

He shook his head.

“Was she someone important to you?”

“You might say that. A while ago she tipped me off about a crime being planned for out at the race track.”

“How did she know?”

He smoothed out the paper he had snatched from her hand earlier.

“From this.”

Talia read the words. Her gaze flew to Weston, watching her.

“Who was she and how did she come to have this?”

“Nellie was the seamstress here in town.”

Talia remembered the quiet, middle-aged brunette she’d spoken to at Lacey and Shane’s. “I met her earlier today. She was a sweet, quiet little thing. Scuttled off when Marvin Lewis joined us. I figured she was shy around men.”

“Not shy. She lost her one true love in the war and stayed faithful to his memory.”

Invisible strings tugged at Talia’s heart. How Nellie must have loved her intended, to subject herself to a life alone with nothing save her memories. She glanced at Weston. She’d heard true love could grow slowly over time. Sadly, it hadn’t happened with Mick. Could the feelings she had for Weston reach the depth of what poor Nellie had known?

“Since she brought this to you, didn’t she tell you who she got it from?”

“Apparently a short time ago, she got swamped with a mess of alterations. Her apprentice went through and emptied all the pockets, but the girl can’t read so Nellie went through the papers in case anything seemed important. That’s when she brought me this.” He smoothed the paper with his index finger. “No names. No details.”

“And now she’s dead.”

“Someone must have either figured she read the telegram and decided to silence her for good. Or come back to claim it.”

“But she didn’t have it. You do.”

Weston looked tired. “I’m hoping she didn’t tell them that part.”

“Well, it seems obvious what we need to do.”

Weston’s eyes were red and bleary. “What’s that?”

“Unbeknownst to you, your new wife has suddenly developed a penchant for gambling. And started hanging around at the track.”

Weston shook his head. “I’ve asked Tom to keep his eyes and ears open out there for me.”

Talia waved a hand in dismissal. “Lacey’s man? No one who’s involved will let anything slip when he’s within earshot.”

“And you think they might in front of the sheriff’s wife?”

“They might if I entreat them to help keep my vice a secret from you.”

“I won’t have it,” Weston said shortly. “Nellie’s death means these folks aren’t messing around or taking any chances. I don’t want you caught up in whatever they’re planning.”

“Too late.” Talia rose and fetched more coffee, setting a pan of bacon over the flame. “My mind is made up.”

“You’re my wife. You’ll do as I say and stay away from the racetrack.”

She turned, hands on hips. “What will you do? Make a scene by coming and dragging me home?”

Weston blew out a breath. Their gazes locked.

“I had no idea when we met that you were such an obstinate little thing.” “You haven’t seen anything yet.” At the look on his face, she softened, laid her hand atop his. “I was powerless to do anything when my husband’s killer walked away with a slap on the wrist. Let me help you nail whoever killed that poor, defenseless woman.”

She wasn’t sure if his sigh was one of resignation or frustration. “I’m working on finding out if Nellie had any next-of-kin. Otherwise, I’ll arrange for her to be buried behind the church.”

“Wouldn’t she want to be buried next to her love?”

“I wouldn’t know his name, let alone where he’s buried.”

~

DOC KINGSLEY HEARD A MUFFLED sound and turned quickly, staring into the shadows of the empty stall next to him. “Who’s there? Show yourself.”

The stables echoed with an eerie laugh that caused several of the race horses to stir. “Not until the time is right,” said a gravelly voice that was obviously disguised.

Doc Kingsley glanced around to see shadows stretching in every direction, making it impossible to pinpoint where the speaker was hiding.

“As far as what we spoke about earlier—”

Doc licked his lips nervously. “I told you. I’m not doing anything like that again.”

“Your son was sick, correct? You needed the money.”

Doc felt a sinking feeling down to his toes. His past, that he thought he’d left behind when he moved West, appeared to have caught up to him.

“He’s fine.”

“I know he is. I see him running around, all sturdy and healthy. I’d hate for anything to happen to him. Or to that lovely wife of yours.”

Doc whisked away the beads of sweat on his forehead with his sleeve. “What is it you want of me?”

“Be ready to do as I say. Or reap the consequences.”

The voice was moving away, but the words were no less ominous. Doc let out a pent-up breath as he turned back to his four-legged charge. At the time, Lacey’s plea for him to join her team at the new track in Colorado had looked like the answer to his prayers. Unfortunately, it was slowly turning into a nightmare.

~

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Weston found time to purchase a dainty little horse and carriage and teach Talia to drive. She'd never had much to do with horses, but from the first she was enchanted with Hildie, with her glossy black coat and the white star on her nose. Weston showed her how to feed the animal a carrot or apple, flat-palmed so she didn't get nipped, and before long they were firm friends. Talia learned how to brush her and bridle her and hitch her to the carriage.

Next, he spent several hours sitting patiently next to her as she guided the horse and carriage around their cabin and the surrounding land before finally graduating to the road. From there, they made several trips past the race track and back, until Weston, reluctantly, deemed her ready to foray off on her own.

"You're just going out there to have a look around," he reminded her. "Without calling attention to yourself."

"Yes, dear," she said, impatient to be off and see if she could uncover anything useful. Maybe if she did, he'd let her help solve other crimes as well. It felt good to have a purpose.

"Ready, Hildie?" she asked her horse, the following day. "I trust you to make me look good." Hildie whinnied softly and her ears twitched as if she was in agreement, leaving Talia excited and nervous as she drove to the track and parked her rig alongside rows of others in the dusty field. She set the brake and picked up her reticule as Weston's words rang in her ear. "Act confident, but not too confident. Watch and listen, but try not to call attention to yourself. Act startled if anyone recognizes you; as if you'd prefer not to be noticed. Then laugh it off. Say something like you'd rather your husband didn't know you'd been there. And don't start placing bets straight away. Give it some time. Like you're trying to feel at home there and learn who you can trust to keep your secret".

She'd familiarized herself with the drawings of the race track, but once on the grounds found it an intimidating place, noisy and foreign. She drew a breath and reminded herself nothing could be worse than the tavern the first few days she worked there.

A race was underway, so she found a spot in the viewing stands away from the crowds, where she hoped to observe what was happening around her without being noticed. Small groups of spectators were scattered about, many not bothering with the stands but hanging over the fence that separated the spectators from the race track. The sun reflected off the large windows behind the stands that stared down at the track, shielding the identity of those watching from the other side of the glass.

From her reticule, she pulled out several betting forms, and held them in one hand as Weston had told her to do. To the casual observer it would look like she had a vested interest in the race results. Next, she retrieved the viewing glasses Weston had given her, raised them to her eyes, and caught her breath as the action at the track became magnified, making her feel she was right there in the middle of it.

She could clearly see the features of each judge near the winner's circle, as well as the individual, colored racing silks and the concentration on the faces of the jockeys as they urged their mounts faster. She panned the area to behind the stables, where grooms or trainers were walking or brushing their horses. Everywhere she looked, dozens of folks scurried about as if they had someplace important to be.

She was so intent on what was happening in the distance, she was unaware of someone slipping into the stands next to her, until she heard a familiar voice at her elbow. "Winston is the favorite," said Marvin Lewis. "I just bought him."

Talia stiffened and caught her breath before she lowered the glasses and turned to her seatmate. "Mr. Lewis."

"Please, Mrs. Holmes, call me Marvin." He took a cursory glance around. "I didn't see your husband anywhere, which led me to surmise you're here on your own. Is this your first time to the Downs?"

Talia pressed her lips together and toyed with the strap of her viewing glasses. "As a matter of fact, the sheriff doesn't know I'm here."

Marvin raised one brow. "And you'd prefer it stay that way?"

Talia nodded. Just then, Marvin leapt to his feet, along with the other spectators. Not knowing what else to do, Talia rose as well, just in time to see half a dozen horses pass the finish line to a chorus of cheers, so close to each other, Talia had no idea how only one could be declared the winner.

Marvin turned to her, flushed in triumph. "Winston won! Please excuse me, Mrs. Holmes."

"Congratulations," she said. As soon as he left the stands she did as well, and found her way to the betting hall. She had no desire to have Marvin Lewis dogging her heels or interfering with her task.

Chapter 6

Talia's plucky spirit and determination to succeed in her mission warmed Weston's innards. How truly amazing to have someone in his life who believed as strongly as he did about right versus wrong. He could almost feel his pa smiling down at him from above.

Whoever killed Nellie had made a clean job of it, and he was forced to put it down as a random killing, likely some drifter traveling through town. Folks' horror and disbelief faded after a couple of days, as they found new dramas to focus on. After six sons, Mrs. Brown finally birthed a baby girl. Rancher Hays got himself a breeding pair of pigs. The sheriff's wife was offering Sunday school lessons for the town's youngsters.

On the day of Nellie's funeral, it seemed like the entire town turned out and Weston cynically wondered if it was morbid curiosity or true neighborliness. He attended the service with Talia, and since no one else had stepped forward, found himself delivering the eulogy, despite the guilt he felt for what happened to the deceased. He ought to have protected her better. Same as he needed to protect Talia.

He glanced to where his wife sat in the front row, smiling encouragingly at him as he spoke. As someone who'd felt alone most of his life, her supportive presence warmed his heart. Last time they'd been in these four walls together had been to exchange their vows, and in the short time since, she had become an important part of his life.

Despite what he told the locals, he no more believed Nellie had been killed by a drifter than that she'd flown to the moon. Had the killer come back for the telegram? Had he or she somehow learned that Nellie had taken the information to the sheriff's office? He glanced out over the sea of faces that filled the small church and wondered if the killer sat among them.

Standing outside afterwards, he was surprised by the number of people who stopped to say hello to the two of them, calling his wife either Mrs. Holmes, or from a few of the women, her given name. He was proud of the fact she knew a lot of them by name. Doc Kingsley, the vet, was there with his wife, and Weston learned their son was

among Talia's Sunday school students.

Old Tom had shown up with his wife, and the retired jockey's presence reminded Weston that he needed to have a heart-to-heart with the man and find out if he'd noticed anything suspicious at the track since they last spoke. Talia had been to the race track daily, frustrated by her lack of progress. The one thing she'd learned was that an Eastern group of big-money players were scheduled to arrive before too long, with their champions. The amount of money rumored to be at stake was beyond his comprehension. He made a mental note to find out if Shane was planning any extra precautions during that time.

Lacey and Shane were among the last to leave, and he sensed they'd waited to talk to him.

"Exciting news," Lacey said. "We just booked the reverend to officiate at the renewal of our vows. My brother Luke's traveling here specifically to give me away, since Papa's too busy. Personally, I suspect he's just not up to the trip but too proud to admit it."

Shane put his arm around his wife. "Despite more than three years and a child together, my wife still doesn't quite feel I've made an honest woman of her yet."

Lacey gave him a pretend jab in the ribs. "I recall it being your idea."

"It was?" He raised a brow.

"Both of ours, then." Lacey smiled at Talia and Weston. "We're having it at the ranch as the church isn't nearly big enough to hold everyone."

"Please let me know what I can do to help," Talia said.

"As a matter of fact," Lacey untangled herself from Shane and pulled Talia off to one side, out of earshot from him and Shane. Weston's eyes followed the women in their low-voiced huddle. At one point Talia stiffened and searched him out, her eyes wide, her face pale. He wondered what was being said. Judging by Talia's stance, it wasn't wedding talk, but something more serious.

With difficulty he forced himself to focus on what Shane was saying.

~

"WHAT WAS on Lacey's mind back there?" he asked casually, as he drove Talia's new carriage back to their cabin.

"Oh, you know. The usual. Their big day coming up."

Weston pulled the rig to a stop on the shoulder of the road and turned to face her. "I thought we agreed we'd always be honest with each other."

Talia blew out a breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry for not being forthright. Someone from the track told Lacey I’d been out there. She asked if you knew about it. I hated lying to her Weston, but I told her you didn’t and begged her to please keep it to herself. Which she agreed to. Reluctantly.”

“I guess it confuses folks to think their Sunday School teacher might have a gambling problem.”

Talia glanced down. “Maybe I shouldn’t have offered to teach the youngsters the scriptures.”

Weston clasped her hand in his. “I’m proud of the way you’re fitting in here in town.”

She licked her lips. “What about you, Weston? Am I fitting in with you?”

Her lashes were the same red gold as her hair and her nose was sprinkled with a delightful smattering of freckles. He had the sudden urge to count each one.

He cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. But he’d promised her honesty. He owed her that. “Talia. My wife. In a relatively short time, you fit into my life as if you’ve been a part of it, always. A part I never knew was missing. Since our marriage, I’ve come to grow real fond of you. Not just your company, but the fact that you seem to understand me in ways no one has before.”

“Oh, Weston!” She flung her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, breathing deeply, as if she couldn’t get enough of his scent. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

She felt good in his arms, a natural place for her to be. Every bit as natural as the way his lips glided down to rain kisses on her forehead, her brow, her eyes and her cheeks, until at last his lips found hers in a long, deep kiss that sent the blood coursing through his veins.

When the kiss ended, he kept one arm around her as he picked up the reins in his free hand. “Let’s go home.”

“Home,” she echoed, laying her head against his chest with a contented sigh.

Chapter 7

Talia returned from an eventful day at Ridgemont Downs to see a strange horse tied up next to Weston's. She scrambled from the carriage, her heart beating fearfully in her chest. Surely the Lord wouldn't have intervened, days after she and Weston discovered happiness as a married couple?

Inside, she was relieved to find Weston sitting at the table, deep in discussion with Tom, Lacey's old jockey and righthand man, and quickly turned to leave them in private. Then Weston looked up and gave her that special smile that made her insides all warm and melted.

"Just in time. Talia, I think you ought to hear what Tom has to say."

Puzzled, Talia took a seat at the table and tucked her hands in her lap.

Tom hesitated. "I don't want to be alarming anyone for no reason."

"It's okay, Tom. Talia is fully in my confidence. That's why she's been out at the track lately."

"Seen her there a few times now," Tom said. "I wondered, when I heard her tell folks you knew nothing about her being there."

"Weston and I hoped an extra set of eyes and ears would be helpful," Talia said.

Tom nodded. "It's more a feeling in my gut than anything specific," he said. "But for my money, there's too many folks hanging out where they got no business being. No one should be in the stables other than the owners, the grooms and trainers, the jockeys and the horse doc."

"Tom's right. I'm starting to recognize the regulars and there seems to be a lot of people with no business there hanging about the stables." She reached across the table and patted his hand. "I'm sorry I haven't unearthed any solid leads for you yet."

Weston addressed Tom. "Anyone else you've seen hanging around?"

"Bunch of blokes from the newspapers, for one."

"Nothing unusual about reporters looking for a scoop," Weston said. "Horse racing in these parts is still pretty much a novelty."

“That’s why folks need to be on guard against strangers. Over the years I’ve seen more than one winner taken out. Poisoned or worse. Often the kind of thing that’s difficult to prove. One time a veterinarian showed up that no one had ever seen before. Claimed to be filling in for the regular doc. No one thought anything about it, till the favorite keeled over halfway through the race and the fake doc was nowhere to be found. Officials never caught up with the man or learned who he’d been in cahoots with, but it sure did shake things up. Lotta people lost a whack of cash that day. Folks around here are new to the sport. They don’t know all the things that can go wrong.”

Weston spoke to Tom. “Do you consider it dangerous for Talia to be out there?”

“Don’t be silly,” Talia said before Tom could answer. “I’m perfectly safe. I had my first win today, a bet to show, and so many of the regulars congratulated me you’d almost think they were sincere with their well wishes.”

“I’m thinking, for every winner there’s always a loser,” Weston said. “Tom? Is Talia safe out there with so many folks around?”

“I don’t see her coming to any harm,” Tom said.

Weston stood. “I appreciate you coming forward with your findings, Tom. Please be extra vigilant and tell your grooms and jockeys the same. Let’s make sure nothing untoward goes down.”

Tom stood as well and banged his hat against his leg before he plopped it on his head. “The Blackmans don’t need no scandal at the track, and that’s for sure.”

~

WESTON SAW Tom to the door then returned to his seat. Talia placed her hand atop his. “What is it? You look troubled.”

Was he that transparent? “I worry that I’ve been looking at this all wrong. There are dozens of different ways a well-organized ring of thieves could strike.”

“It would take quite an elaborate ruse to fix a race without anyone suspecting what happened.”

Which is exactly what was troubling him. “With those moneyed players from the East coming in with their horses, the stakes will rise considerably. If I were a criminal, I’d find the increase in betting definitely tempting.”

As he spoke, he tapped Talia’s well-organized sheaf of notes. It hadn’t taken her long to make friends with the fellows setting the odds for each race. In her notes were listings of who laid the biggest bets, which gamblers played the odds, and who preferred to play it safe.

She also included notations of handicaps, favorite jockeys, long

shots and a whole other passel of information that he wished contained some clue as to what type of crime could be in the planning stages, and who was behind it.

When the silence between them stretched longer than normal, he looked up from her neatly penned notes. It was the same neat penmanship as her letter stating her interest in marrying him, despite the unusual circumstances. It struck him how lucky he was. Having Talia in his life had taken away the loneliness and diminished the unhappy memories.

Which is why she deserved to know the truth.

Chapter 8

As Talia looked at the freshly-scrubbed faces of her young charges, her heart did a wild flutter. Was it possible? Could it maybe happen that one day her and Weston's child would be paying rapt attention to her words the way these children were?

"And who were Adam's sons?" she asked.

A hand shot up from the front row. "Dolly?"

"Cain and Abel. But Cain was bad. He was mean to his brother." Her face grew serious, her eyes downcast. "Mama says I must always be kind to my baby brother and not be like Cain."

"That's very true. We must always be kind to others, even when they are unkind to us."

Another hand shot up, this time from the back. "Yes, Harry."

"My pa says if everyone was good, we wouldn't need to have Sheriff Holmes. There wouldn't be no bad people in jail."

"Kindness is certainly part of that," Talia said. "But do you remember the Ten Commandments? We have to remember more than to just be kind. What else?"

"Don't tell a fib," said one child.

"That's right. And next week we'll talk about some of those other ways we can be good people and do the will of God."

At her nod, the curate, who was standing in the back of the room, opened the door of the small room off the rectory where they had gathered. Quickly, the children jumped to their feet and flooded through.

Talia smiled to herself. School would always be school. She flipped through her bible, a treasured legacy from her parents and their parents before them, wishing she had access to the lesson sheets she'd used in Brooklyn. Preparing a new lesson each week was going to be a lot more work than she had anticipated.

She heard footsteps and looked up to see Marvin Lewis step into the room and remove his hat. His eyes darted about the place curiously.

"Mr. Lewis. Can I help you?"

"I have a tip for you," he said. "Desmond's Pride is a guaranteed

sure thing at the track next week."

"I never bet on a sure thing," she said quickly.

"Smart," the man said. "I wouldn't have bet I'd ever see you teaching Sunday school. Seems rather at odds with what you do the rest of the week."

Talia closed her bible. "Do you need something?"

His eyes met hers in a way that made her uncomfortable. As if he was trying to ascertain what was different about her today. She flushed. Surely it wasn't obvious to others that she and Weston—

"Not at this time," he said. "But think about placing a bet on Desmond's Pride. You'll regret it if you don't."

Talia gathered up her bible and her reticule. "I try not to have regrets."

He continued to study her while he nodded in a knowing way. Luckily, the curate chose that moment to arrive.

"Okay if I lock up now, Mrs. Holmes?"

"Yes," Talia said. "Mr. Lewis and I were just leaving." She gave Lewis a haughty look. "After you, sir."

He shook his head and gave a rueful smile. "Where I was raised, it was always 'ladies first'."

Aware of the curate's curious look, Talia rose. Even though she sucked in her breath, it was impossible to exit the room without brushing closely past Mr. Lewis on her way out. As she reached her carriage, she had a feeling that one way or another, Marvin Lewis had gotten one up on her.

~

ARRIVING HOME, she was surprised to see Weston's horse tied up outside their cabin. Even though it was Sunday and everything in town was shut down, he still normally made his rounds, saying he liked to keep an eye on things.

Before she had a chance to climb down, he appeared and took her hand. Rather than letting her go when her feet reached the ground, he reeled her close with one hand as he pulled his other hand from behind his back and extended a bouquet of wildflowers her way.

Talia blanched. "For me?"

His eyes twinkled. "Who else?" She took the bouquet and buried her nose in them, taking a shuddery breath. No man had ever given her flowers before.

She looked up and smiled. "What's the occasion?"

"How about I'm spending the rest of the day with my wife?"

"But what about your work?"

"Hang work. Even the Lord rested on the Sabbath. Now I have a

reason to as well." He kept his arm around her waist as they headed for the cabin. "How did the class go?"

"Fine. I'll just put these in water so they last longer."

She fetched a chipped floral jug and pumped it full of water from the handle at the sink. She was still getting used to having running water inside.

Flowers arranged, she carried them through to the dining table. Weston followed and smiled as she spun the jug so the flowers were displayed to best advantage.

"They look lovely," he said, but his eyes were on her, not the bouquet.

"Yes, thank you so much. They help brighten the place."

"The same way you do. Speaking of that, I have something to show you that requires a short drive."

Talia's curiosity grew. "You're behaving awfully mysterious today. Flowers and an outing?"

He grinned ear-to-ear, like a youngster with a secret. He looked years younger without his brow knotted in concern, the way it usually was. Talia felt a pleasant warmth spread through her. Clearly, marriage agreed with him.

~

THEY DROVE SOUTH A SHORT DISTANCE, until eventually Weston pulled the carriage to a stop atop a slight rise with a view of the valley below, outlined with a row of tress whose leaves were just starting to change color. He set the brake.

"What do you think?"

"What a lovely spot," Talia said. "I expect the sunset would be quite something."

Weston couldn't hide his grin. "I thought it was time you and I had a place of our own."

"But the cabin—"

"Barely adequate when it was just me. I want something better for my wife. For us." He tilted her chin up with one finger. "Any objections?"

"I just—it seems such a big step."

"You're not considering leaving, are you?"

"Oh, Weston! Not for a second. My home is here with you. But a new house!"

"We'll plan it together," he said as he linked his fingers through hers and lifted their joined hands to kiss her knuckles. "So start thinking about how you'd like it to look. How many bedrooms we might need."

His heart lifted when a becoming pink tinged her cheeks.

"Come on," he said. "You can't see it from here, but there's a creek running down by that line of trees. I thought it would be a good spot for a garden."

Taking her by the hand he walked her to the site he had picked out to build their home. "I figure the house will go here with the out buildings out back. Eventually we'll have chickens, along with a cow and maybe a couple of pigs or goats. I'll fix up a way to pump water from the creek to the garden so we're not using up the well water." He swung her in a wide circle. "Think you can be happy here, Mrs. Holmes?"

"I think I can be happy anywhere you are, Sheriff Holmes."

He cleared his throat and gave her his most serious lawman's expression. "I don't want you going out to the race track any more. Tom's agreed to be out there when that lot from out East arrives, and I feel if something's going to happen, that's when it'll be."

"Tom's an old man," she said. "Why is it all right for him to be in danger?"

"No saying he will be. I just don't want you anywhere near the place. Your safety means everything to me."

"What about my happiness? Isn't that important to you?"

"Of course I want you to be happy."

"Truth now," she said, her gaze solemn on his. "Would you be this worried and protective if certain aspects of our marriage hadn't changed recently?"

"I'd be worried about you no matter what."

"Then let me continue what I started, Weston. For the town. For justice."

Weston pulled back, fuming. "You are the most stubborn woman ever." With that he turned around and stomped back to the carriage.

She followed and threw herself next to him with a determined huff.

"Maybe we should have stayed with our original agreement. Marriage in name only."

"You're probably right. I was afraid romantic feelings would get things all muddied up."

The color drained from her face before she got a hold of herself. He was worried, is all.

"What do you know about Marvin Lewis?"

Weston picked up the reins and the carriage lurched forward. "Not my type of person. Friends with Lacey's brother is all I know. Why?"

"He showed up when I was teaching my class today."

Weston pulled on the reins and the horse stopped abruptly. "At your class! Did he say what he wanted?"

“Claimed to have a tip for me on a sure thing next week. Horse by the name of Desmond’s Pride.”

“Is it one of those horses expected with the Eastern contingent?”

“That I couldn’t say. But I didn’t like that he knew where to find me.”

“Probably he found out from Lacey,” Weston said. “He couldn’t exactly come around the cabin in case I was there.” In spite of himself, he gave her an admiring look. “What this means is that your cover is working.”

“Which is all the more reason for me to see this through.”

~

TALIA FOUND it impossible to concentrate. The track was buzzing with an air of excitement ever since the horse owner from the East, someone as famous as his horses, arrived with his contingent of horses, trainers, jockeys and his own veterinarian. She gathered Lacey and Mr. Owen were acquainted from Pennsylvania, and was grateful her friend was too busy planning the renewal of her marriage vows to spend much time at the track. Talia had grown really adept at slipping into the background and not calling attention to herself, and she planned to keep it that way.

Tom was also spending a lot of time out at the track. From time to time their eyes met, but they had agreed it was better if they weren’t seen together. Up in the stands, the viewing glasses Weston gave her came in handy for more than just watching the race.

As promised by Marvin Lewis, Desmond’s Pride cleaned up, followed by much speculation that he could be a favorite against Mr. Owen’s champ. Talia studied the betting boards and noticed how the odds fluctuated from day to day depending on the results of each day’s race as the participants geared up for the upcoming big race. Every day she saw more people at the track and longer lines at the betting window, followed by bigger wins and even bigger losses. She kept her bets to a minimum, eavesdropping wherever she could, but never caught a whisper to suggest anything was in the works besides the race. She was letting Weston down, as well as herself.

She climbed into her carriage later that day, feeling despondent over her lack of progress. She picked up the reins, but had only gone a few yards when the horse stopped and turned to give her a puzzled look. She looked to where one front wheel was sitting at an awkward tilt, leaving the carriage listing to one side. She climbed down and stared at it balefully. Wheel repairs hadn’t been among Weston’s lessons.

“That looks inconvenient.” A large man on an even larger black

horse stopped near where she stood. Talia looked up but didn't remember seeing him before in these parts. Perhaps he was one of the new players from the East. He dismounted and squatted close to study the damaged carriage. He looked up at her, the sun illuminating his features despite the brim of his hat.

"Sorry I can't be the white knight to the damsel's rescue, but I don't have any tools with me. Best I can do is offer you a lift."

She glanced from the man to his huge, black mount. Surely he didn't mean—

"I can tie your horse behind mine and bring her along. Unless you fancy riding her bareback."

Talia didn't fancy riding at all. Lacey had hinted at giving her lessons, but it hadn't happened as yet.

"Thank you for the kind offer," she said stiffly. "But I believe—" Just then she spotted Marvin Lewis watching her from the other side of the field with a calculating look. Given the choice of being rescued by Mr. Lewis or the stranger before her, she opted for the stranger.

"I'm back towards town," she said, waving her hands in that general direction before she added, "I'm married to Sheriff Holmes." Just so he didn't think she was some fresh-off-the-train ninny.

"Grant Chisholm, at your service, Mrs. Holmes. I have the spread one over from Shane and Lacey."

"In that case, I'm surprised we haven't met before now."

"I've been away and just got back. Family business."

"Are you involved with horses as well?"

"Cattle," he said. "For the time being."

She wondered what that meant. And what brought him to the track.

As they spoke, he unhitched Hildie from the carriage and tied her reins to the back of his saddle. Before Talia realized his intention, he picked her up and slung her high into the saddle. She grasped the saddled horn in panic. It was a long way up. Seconds later, he swung up behind her and reached around to pick up the reins, his arms grazing her middle. She'd have to ask Weston about their near neighbor.

~

WESTON COULDN'T BELIEVE his eyes when he saw Chisholm ride up to the cabin with Talia perched in front of him. He felt an unwanted stab of jealousy at the sight of the other man, arms around *his* woman.

"What's going on?" he asked gruffly.

"Happened across your woman stranded at the track," Chisholm said easily. "Seemed only neighborly to bring her back."

Weston approached the stallion as Chisholm dismounted. He moved quickly to help Talia dismount, keeping his arm securely around his wife as Chisholm unfastened Hildie's reins and passed them his way.

"Much obliged," Weston said, keeping a proprietary hold on what was his, for Chisholm had a reputation of having an eye for the ladies.

"My pleasure," Chisholm said as he prepared to mount. "You'll need a few tools to get that front wheel put right."

Talia turned his way as Chisholm rode out of sight. "Did I do something wrong?"

Weston gave his head a brief shake, ashamed of his jealousy, given that Talia had never done a single thing to make him think he couldn't trust her.

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Nothing. Just rankled that I wasn't the one to come to your rescue."

When she smiled up at him, he saw his own image reflected in her eyes. "Don't worry. In my world, you'll always be my shining knight to the rescue."

Weston sighed, hoping Talia never found herself in need of serious rescue. And if she did, that he got there in time.

~

AFTER A FRANTIC WEEK at the track, with rumors and odds and favorites changing constantly, the day of the anticipated final race dawned clear and fair. Talia had been surprised to learn the race was scheduled for the same day as Lacey's big event, but gathered it had something to do with her brother's visit and when he needed to leave. Some business deal pending back in Pennsylvania.

Timing would be tight, but Talia figured she could watch the race and still make it to Lacey and Shane's in time for the party. As reluctant as Weston was regarding her presence at the track, he'd come around and had agreed she ought to be there. They arranged to meet afterwards at the party.

She'd never seen the track so busy, or the lineups to place bets so long, and decided to sit this one out. She gathered folks had come from all four corners to see a race that was touted as the race of the century, and try their luck. In spite of herself, she felt caught up in the frenzy, her pulse racing and her breath shortened as if she'd just run a great distance.

The main race wasn't scheduled to start for a while so she decided to take a spin around the stables. Men and horses were everywhere and no one gave her a second glance. When she heard raised voices in what was clearly an argument, she approached slowly, sticking to the

shadows. The confrontation was between Doc Kingsley, and the new veterinarian who was part of Mr. Owen's party. After a short but heated exchange, Doc Kingsley threw up his hands and stalked off. Talia slipped further into the shadows as he passed her, making a mental note to mention the incident to Weston. No doubt he'd want to talk to the doc and find out what sparked the disagreement.

Back at her usual spot in the stands, the first row at the far end, she heard an announcement that the betting counter was closed and the race was about to begin. The air around her pulsed with anticipation.

The starter dropped the flag and the horses surged forward onto the track. From her vantage point, Talia clenched her glasses so tightly they left a mark on her palm. The race was close, the track a blur of horseflesh marked by the different colored silks.

Near the halfway point, one of the horses went down. Desmond's Pride. The crowd sprang to their feet with a roar of disbelief. Seconds later, a second horse faltered and hit the track, his legs collapsing underneath him.

Talia looked away. She hated to see animals in distress. She slipped from her seat and through the surging crowd as she made her way up to the betting hall, which was unnaturally quiet. She'd expected it to be abuzz with the latest developments. Instead, as she entered the room, you could almost hear a pin drop. No one looked her way. Behind the counter, the attendants' attention was focused away from the door. Toward a masked man with a gun who slowly turned her way.

Chapter 9

Weston paced back and forth, pulling out his timepiece every couple of minutes, as he fretted over what was keeping Talia. At the front of the crowd, Shane was talking with the reverend. Not far from the pair, Lacey was talking to a man who must be her brother Luke, for the resemblance was unmistakable. A third man, formally dressed in city clothes with a frock coat, stood a short distance from the couple, who were pointing and gesticulating at the crowd.

Just then Lacey spotted Weston and waved him forward. With one last glance behind him, hoping to see Talia's carriage pull up, he shouldered his way through the crowd.

Lacey introduced him to her brother. "Weston, would you be a sweetheart and get the guests to open a pathway through for us. Luke suddenly turned all old-fashioned. He wants to walk me up to Shane and give me away." She glanced behind him. "Where's Talia?"

"She's on her way," Weston said gruffly. "She must have gotten held up, but she'll be here."

Lacey nodded and pulled him aside. "Something you need to know. My brother's friend accompanied him. Marvin Lewis."

Hearing his name, the city slicker turned to Weston and extended a hand.

Weston's jaw dropped. "*You're* Marvin Lewis?"

The fellow nodded. "Pleased to meet you."

Weston looked at Lacey. "If this is Marvin Lewis, who's the joker with the same name who's been hanging around town for the last six months?"

"I don't know," Lacey said. "But he's clearly an imposter."

"The shyster was even at the party you threw for Talia and I." Not only was the man not who he'd claimed to be, he'd shown an inordinate interest in Weston's wife.

"Am I to understand someone has been in town claiming to be me," asked the man.

"Dead to rights," Weston said. "He was really vocal about knowing your family."

Lacey faced the real Marvin Lewis. "Any chance he's kin to you?

He seemed to know an awful lot about you."

Marvin pursed his lips. "I had a man servant I let go last year after I caught him stealing."

Weston's heart sank. His mouth went dry. The imposter Marvin Lewis was almost always out at the race track. And now Talia was nowhere to be seen. It could be a coincidence, but Weston made a point of never leaving things to chance.

With a quick apology to his hosts, he mounted his horse and took off at a gallop for the race track, berating himself for listening to Talia. For not insisting she keep clear of the place.

~

THE GUNMAN WORE a black hat with a wide brim, his face covered with a bandana. He gave Talia a dismissive glance and turned his attention to the clerks behind the betting booth. "I believe my request was clear." His voice was too muffled behind the bandana to be recognizable. "All cash in the safe to be emptied into those saddlebags on the counter. Move it!"

As the cashiers scurried to do the robber's bidding, Talia swallowed and started to back slowly toward the door. She jumped, then froze when a bullet whizzed by her so quickly she felt the air move, before the bullet became imbedded in the doorframe.

The thief gathered up the loot-filled saddlebags in his free hand and slung them over his shoulder. "A hostage," he murmured as if to himself, as he wedged a crowbar into the door handle behind her. "Brilliant." He pointed the gun at Talia. "You're coming with me."

Talia's feet felt locked into place. The man grabbed her arm and pushed her roughly out a back door and down a narrow staircase to an outside area she'd never seen before, where a carriage and driver waited. Catching sight of them, a second man jumped down and took the saddlebags from her captor.

"What's with her?"

"Hostage," said the gunman, as he shoved a rag in her mouth and roughly lashed her hands behind her back before he pushed her into the back of the carriage and pulled a carriage robe overtop of her. Talia tried to kick it off. She could barely breathe. She heard the wagon springs squeak as the two men boarded, and then they were moving away from the track. Headed north, from what she could tell.

~

THE SECOND WESTON arrived at the race track, he was beset by a mob, everyone shouting at once in an effort to be heard over each

other. He tuned them out and scanned the surrounding area for Talia. Every direction Weston looked he saw chaos. Spectators were yelling and jostling each other as they attempted to push their way upstairs or to the stables, where jockeys and horses milled about in shock. The judges' stand was abandoned.

Somehow, through the crowd, he spotted Tom and made his way to the old man's side. "What on earth is going on?"

Tom shook his grizzled head. "Never saw nothing like it. Partway through the race, two horses went down. Doc Kingsley ain't nowhere to be found. Luckily neither of the horses or jockeys were hurt bad, but I knew something wasn't proper. Right after the incident, I saw your wife head for the betting hall. Not long after, word goes round there's been a robbery, and a female hostage taken." He lowered his eyes. "Sorry, Sheriff."

Not Talia!

Except, wasn't that just like her, racing in where angels feared to tread?

"Folks started storming the betting hall, but the door's locked. Word is thieves made off with the cash." Tom met his gaze. "Biggest purse ever in the entire country."

"Nothing you can do here," Weston said. "You should go be with your wife at Lacey's bash. Tell them what happened and that I'll be along as soon as I can. Oh, and Tom. Keep an eye out for Marvin Lewis, would you? Man's an imposter." Then he turned and prepared to push his way up to the betting hall.

The area leading to the main staircase was clogged tight with bodies, so Weston went around back, recalling how the plans included a narrow back staircase as a safety precaution in case the wood structure ever caught fire. He took note of carriage tracks near the back door. Funny, it wasn't like a gang of thieves to take off by carriage rather than horseback. Unless they weren't going far.

He wondered if the incident during the race was a coincidence or part of a master plan to keep the spectators' attention elsewhere. The fact of Doc Kingsley not being in attendance was also troubling, especially in light of Marvin Lewis not being who he claimed. Every step he took, he prayed he'd run into Talia.

The three cashiers, barricaded behind the betting windows, looked relieved to see him. The main door to the betting hall was held in place with a metal crowbar, while a barrage of swearing and threats came from behind it. It sounded as if someone was trying to kick it in.

"They're going crazy out there," said one of the men, who still wore his eye shade. His wrinkled shirt sleeves were held up with braces above the elbow. Weston glanced over his shoulder and wondered how long till the crowd broke through.

“Tell me what happened?”

“It happened fast,” said a second man. “Heard a whole bunch of yelling and went over to the window to see what the hullabaloo was about. Just then, a man strolls in like he owns the place, and pulls out a gun. Tells us to give him all the cash.”

“You recognize him?” Weston asked.

All three shook their heads. “Wore a hat. His face was covered and his voice was kind of muffled.”

“’Cept for his boots,” said one of the men. “Fancy gray snakeskin. I’d seen them around before.”

So had Weston!

Then the other clerk interrupted. “Then, in walks this lady. A regular. At first, I thought she was in cahoots with the robber. Turned out not. He shot at her and took her as a hostage.”

Weston’s gut clenched. He’d suspected all along something had happened to Talia. His innards had been bugging him ever since she didn’t show up earlier. “Was the lady hit?”

“Didn’t look like it. Bullet caught the doorframe next to her.”

Weston found the spot where the wood had splintered, took out his pocket knife and dug the bullet free. It was from a .36 Colt, typically favored by bank robbers. “They go out the back?”

One of the men nodded.

“See anyone else with him?”

“It’s been crazy busy around here this week since Owen got here with his people and horses. What should we do, Sheriff?” asked the man with the eyeshade, who Weston figured was in charge.

Weston gave himself a mental shake. He was a lawman. He needed to act like one instead of a worried husband.“I’ll see if they left a trail.”

“I mean what should we do right now?” Eye-shade’s eyes bugged as he jerked his head toward the main door. “Folks’ll demand their money back, seeing how the race didn’t finish.”

“I suggest you leave the back way and go notify the track’s owners what happened.” *Heck of a thing to have happen in the midst of his friends’ special day. But possibly that had been the plan all along if the thieves knew Shane and Lacey would be busy elsewhere.*

Chapter 10

Before long, the carriage slowed to a stop and the lap robe was lifted off Talia before she was jerked out of the carriage and the gag removed, leaving her mouth parched. She tried to swallow, but there was nothing there. When her feet touched the ground, her legs cramped up from their awkward position when she'd been thrown in the carriage. She fell, unable to save herself with her hands tied behind her. Her mouth and nose were clogged with dust. Her whole body hurt as she raised her head with difficulty to see a crude cabin.

"Guess we didn't need no hostage after all," said one of the men. "What are you going to do with her?"

Talia struggled awkwardly to her feet, then gasped as she recognized her captors. Two of the men she knew from seeing them hanging around the stables, claiming to be reporters. The third, the one in the hat who'd shot at her and handled the cash, was Marvin Lewis.

"I should have known," she said, her tongue tasting grit on her teeth as she spoke.

"Mrs. Holmes." Lewis made a mocking bow. "Welcome to my humble cabin. Won't you come in?"

"I'd rather not."

"Sorry to say, you have no choice in the matter." Lewis picked her up, threw her upside down over his shoulder, kicked open the front door and tossed her onto a straight back chair near a rusty wood stove. The other two followed.

The interior was shabby with a few broken bits of furniture, in stark contrast to the rack of fashionable city clothing against one wall. Lewis dropped the saddlebags carelessly onto a table before he cinched a second rope around her middle to anchor her to the chair. "In case you have any ideas about trying to run."

One of the men was looking around uneasily. "Give us our share. We gotta get outta here. The sooner the better."

"Not so fast," Lewis said as he exchanged his rough-looking jacket for one of the fancy ones Talia was used to seeing him in. "It's my dear friends' party. Folks would look askance if I didn't at least make

an appearance and apologize for my tardiness. We'll settle up when I get back."

One of the men pulled a gun. "I say we settle up first. We got no guarantee you're coming back."

"Very well." With an aggrieved sigh, Marvin opened the saddle bags and counted out a hefty stack of bills for each man. He looked from one to the other. "Our agreed upon fee. With a little something extra." He added a third pile and pushed it toward the first two.

"For what?" asked the man holding the gun.

"For disposing of Mrs. Holmes. After all, she's married to the sheriff. And she knows who we are. Good day, gentlemen." Lewis slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and left, slamming the door behind him. Talia heard his jaunty whistle slowly fade in the distance.

Eyes wide, Talia glanced from one captor to the other as the men exchanged a glance.

"I don't know about you," one of them said finally. "I didn't sign up to be no murderer."

"Me either," said the second.

"I'll say you wore masks," Talia implored. "That Mr. Lewis was the only one I recognized."

"And your word's good?" said the first, as he moved behind her.

Talia swallowed and nodded her head vigorously.

"We need a head start," said the second.

"That we do," said his companion, just before something cracked across the back of Talia's head.

~

AFTER CHECKING one last time to be sure Talia wasn't caught in the pandemonium at the race track, Weston followed the carriage's tire marks for a few miles north until he reached a shallow creek bed where the trail ended. He guided his horse across, but no tracks showed up on the other side. He glanced around in exasperation. The creek bed was flat and wide, the carriage could have come out miles away in either direction on the other side.

Discouraged, he rode toward Shane and Lacey's spread, a thousand splintered thoughts running through his mind. Too many things that happened today didn't add up. The Marvin Lewis imposter. Doc Kingsley's disappearance from his post, for the man was devoted to the horses. Then there was the interrupted race, which may or not be linked to the robbery. One thing he knew was that this crime had been a long time in the planning. Clearly, more than one party was involved, even though the cashiers had only been victimized by one thief. A thief who appeared to have made off with his wife.

He arrived at his destination, unable to believe his eyes. For there ahead of him, preparing to dismount, was the fake Marvin Lewis, bold as brass. Clearly, the man had no idea he'd been revealed as a phony.

"Howdy, Mr. Lewis," Weston said as he dismounted and tethered his horse. "Glad to see I'm not the only one who's late for the celebrations."

Lewis gave him a wary look as he checked out the man's fancy, gray snakeskin boots. "Sheriff. Better late than never, I always say. Hopefully the Blackmans will forgive us."

"If they even noticed our absence." After first taking note of the Colt .36 in the man's holster, Weston threw his arm around Lewis in a false gesture of friendship. He felt Lewis stiffen, before he appeared to relax. Weston took advantage of the move to exert a painful amount of pressure to a point in the man's neck.

"You were at the track earlier."

Lewis tried to dislodge Weston's hold. "What is this?"

"This is how we treat kidnappers and imposters. See, unfortunately for you, the real Marvin Lewis happens to be in attendance here today. In fact, let's find him right now and see if he can identify you."

Lewis's elbow caught Weston in the ribs at the same time his booted foot tangled with Weston's, sending Weston crashing painfully to his knees. Before he could reach his gun, he heard a shot and felt a burning pain tear through his left leg.

Pulling out his gun, he managed to get off two shots as Lewis jumped onto his horse and rode off.

The gun shots attracted a small crowd who moments earlier had been eating and drinking merrily. Shane reached his side first and helped him to his feet. Weston sucked in his breath as lightning hot pain tore through his side. He saw Lacey's face through the crowd, followed by the doctor.

"Get me out of here," he said low-voiced to Shane. "I don't have time for the doc. I need to follow that imposter. He knows where my wife is."

~

TALIA OPENED HER EYES SLOWLY, aware of a dull, painful throb at the base of her skull, stabbing her eyes as the light penetrated. Despite the pain, she blinked until her vision gradually cleared. She had no idea how long ago the two men had left, and wasn't about to hang around in case Lewis decided to return and make sure she was dead.

The rope around her waist seemed to have loosened a little when she unconscious, possibly due to the hearty wallop she received. Her wrists were still bound, but she managed to wiggle her fingers and

pick at the knotted rope anchoring her to the chair. It was slow going, and she felt the smaller rope cut painfully into the skin at her wrists, but eventually the rope around her middle fell away.

What she wouldn't give for a sip of cool water. She took a breath and rose slowly, making sure she wasn't about to get dizzy and black out again. The cabin door gaped partially open, and she managed to push it the rest of the way with her hip. Outside, she blinked against the bright sunlight. The imminent arrival of fall meant the sun was lower in the sky, and she judged the better part of the day had passed. She needed to get out of here before darkness fell. She used the sun's position to figure out which direction to go before she started up the narrow dusty street out front.

She hadn't trudged far before she reached a rusty metal fencepost at the end of a long, overgrown driveway. One side of the post had a rusty screw sticking out about an inch, and she backed against it, hoping it was sharp enough to cut through the ropes at her wrist.

Slowly, painfully, she raised and lowered her bound wrists back and forth against the screw. Her muscles protested the unnatural move and her shoulders ached with her efforts, which all seemed in vain, when she should be putting distance between herself and Lewis's cabin in case he returned. She was just about to give up when she heard a horse and wagon coming down the driveway toward her. She looked around, but there was nowhere to hide.

"Whoa!" The farmer pulled up as he came abreast of her. "You lost, ma'am?"

"I was kidnapped by your neighbor down the road, and only just managed to escape."

The man jumped from his seat and approached her as if unsure of what to do, or if she might suddenly prove dangerous. His gaze narrowed. "Where you from?"

"Ridgemont," she said. "I'm the sheriff's wife."

"Miz Holmes? Why didn't you say so?" The man pulled a knife from his belt and came toward her. Talia's breath caught, then exhaled in a long whoosh as the man turned her around in order to cut the ropes cinching her wrists.

"I'm going right by your place," he said. "Happy to deliver you safe." He looked down at her wrists, which were raw and bleeding. "You'd best get the doc to take a look at your injuries."

"Thank you. I will." Talia managed to climb unaided into the front of the wagon. First, she had to find Weston and tell him what happened. Then she

needed to leave.

Chapter 11

The decision had come to her with startling clarity during the time she'd spent working her way free from her confining bonds at Lewis's. She'd failed miserably. She'd been taken in by Marvin Lewis, who was in fact the instigator of the robbery. She'd believed the two men who claimed to be reporters, Lewis's accomplices freely casing the area. Then she'd blundered into the robbery in progress, powerless to stop it or prevent herself from being taken hostage.

Worse than all of that, she'd ignored Weston's wishes that theirs be a marriage in name only. She'd lied to herself and to Weston, and put her own needs first; caught up in her desire to experience a real marriage. To link her life with Weston's. To finally feel she belonged somewhere, even as Weston assured her it would be easy to get a divorce. It was time she listened, for clearly he didn't feel as she did, that once married in the eyes of the Lord, always married.

"Give the sheriff my regards," the farmer said as he pulled the wagon to a stop in front of Weston's cabin. "From Wilbur Brown."

"I will. Thank you, Mr. Brown." She swallowed the lump in her throat thinking of the home Weston had talked about building on that tract of land he had shown her. The joy she had found in his company and his kisses.

The cabin was neat as a pin, just as she had left it that morning, and she recalled her delight at discovering Weston was as tidy as she was, one of the many ways they were compatible. She sighed as she looked around, memorizing her surroundings. In the bedroom she had shared with Weston, pain clutched her chest as she pulled her valise out from under the bed.

~

WESTON CHAFED AT THE DELAY. The fake Lewis already had a good head start. But Shane wasn't letting him go anywhere until the doctor dragged out his doctoring satchel and checked him over. The bullet had barely nicked him, not doing any lasting damage. But nothing would do except for Doc to paint him up with stuff that stung like the

blazes, and slap a plaster on the area.He finally got his pants back on and rose to his feet.

"Just where do you think you're going?" Doc asked as he snapped his bag shut.

"Going after the fake Lewis. Find my wife."

"You can't ride. You'll rip the wound open and start bleeding."

"I'll take my chances." Weston pushed past him, and sucked in his breath when each step sent a stabbing pain through his thigh. He reached his horse and gritted his teeth as he prepared to mount.

After two tries he landed in the saddle and sat for a minute waiting for the dizziness to subside. Before he could leave, Shane rode up to him with half a dozen ranch hands right behind.

"You're not stopping me," Weston warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it. Thought perhaps you could use a wingman. Or a posse of them."

"But Lacey… Your party."

"Lacey, of all people, understands that a man has to do what a man has to do."

Weston nodded and pulled on the reins to direct his horse the same way Lewis had ridden off.

Their group hadn't traveled far before they spotted a farmer's wagon coming their way. When they started to pass, the driver pulled up.

"Thought that was you, Sheriff. The missus okay? She was pretty shaken up when I dropped her off earlier."

Weston started. "You saw my wife? Where?"

"Caught up with her at the end of my drive. I wanted to take her to the doc, but she insisted I drop her off at your place."

"Was she hurt?"

"Mostly shaken and banged up. Ropes cut into her wrists pretty good."

Weston saw red.

Shane gave him a long look. "Go see to your woman."

Conflict tore through him as the farmer touched his fingers to the brim of his hat and drove off. He was the sheriff. It was his job to pursue the thief and his accomplices before they left the county. "You hired me to do a job."

"Hang the job," Shane said. "You're fired."

"Fired!"

"Fired for stupidity if you can't figure out that being a husband comes first. Taking care of your woman comes first." Shane's eyes narrowed. "What was Talia doing out at the track? Why wasn't she at the party with the other wives?"

"She—" Anything he might say sounded lame to his ears. "I had it

on good authority that something big was going down. Talia offered to help. Be my eyes and ears at the track."

Shane's mouth thinned in disapproval. "Anybody pin a star on her chest?"

Weston shook his head.

"Like you already learned, wearing a badge doesn't put any man above the law. Nor does it mean you're the law first and a man second. You'd do well to remember that."

"There's a thief out there making a clean getaway."

"And he's about to learn, no one steals from a Blackman. Come on, boys. Let's go hunt us a bad guy."

Still torn, Weston headed for home. Home where his woman was. The woman who had captured his heart and renewed his soul. He respected the law and his job, along with the badge he wore, but Shane was right. His first loyalty was to Talia and the life they had begun to forge together. He was a husband first, and a lawman second.

~

TALIA FOUND some salve over the stove and doctored up her wrists, which weren't as bad as they looked, then stared balefully at her empty, mocking valise on the bed. She knew she ought to pack. But she couldn't leave without talking to Weston first. That wouldn't be right. He needed to know that while she wasn't sorry she'd met him, she was sorry she'd compromised his principles and complicated his life. And deeply sorry she'd let him down. Him and the entire community she'd been gung-ho on helping.

She was folding one of her night dresses when she heard a horse approach at a gallop then stop outside. Please Lord, not Lewis, hunting her down. She peered out the window to see Weston dismount stiffly, favoring his left leg.

He was hurt! Packing abandoned, she rushed to his side, her heart in her throat.

His face lit up when he caught sight of her. "Talia." His gait was unsteady as he reached her and swept her up in his arms.

"Wait! What happened?" She bent to inspect the bloody hole in the leg of his pants.

"Barely a nick."

Her eyes widened. "You were shot?"

"It was nothing." He grabbed her hands and ran his thumbs over her raw wrists. His eyes hardened, but his arms around her were gentle. He ran a shaky hand through her hair. She could hear the ragged beating of his heart as he exhaled heavily.

“The robber was Marvin Lewis,” Talia said, her voice muffled against his chest as she savored his strong arms around her. “He’s the thief and the mastermind.”

“I wish I’d killed that blackheart when I had the chance, but he was my only lead to you.” He glanced over her head and through the door to the open valise on the bed. He took a step back, his hands gentle on her shoulders as he looked deep into her eyes.

“Were you going somewhere?”

“I—” She toyed with a button on his shirt front. “I thought I should. I failed to be the wife you wanted. In every way. You were shot because of me!”

“Talia!” Her name was a groan and a benediction. “You are the perfect wife for me. When I realized what had happened, that Lewis was an imposter—”

“Wait. Back up! He’s an imposter. How do you know?”

“The real Marvin Lewis showed up at Shane’s with Lacey’s brother. When you didn’t arrive, I hightailed it out to the track. Didn’t take long to figure you were the one taken hostage. I dogged the thief’s heels for a while, before I lost him.” He pressed kisses to the top of her head, and dragged her close again. His heart beating so near hers was the sweetest thing she’d ever felt. “I thought I lost you.”

“He bragged to me that he was going to the party. The nervy scoundrel!”

“By the time he got there, I had his number.” Weston made a rueful swipe toward his injury. “Apparently, he didn’t feel like telling me where you were.” One finger under her chin lifted her face to his. “I prayed to the Lord to protect you. Believe me when I tell you I was prepared to move heaven and earth to find you.”

“Since when did you become a God-fearing man?”

“Since the day He brought me an angel.”

Talia swallowed. Her eyes filled. “But originally you said you didn’t want a real marriage.”

He pressed his lips together and appeared to hesitate before he spoke. “I should have told you the truth up front, the way you told me about your Mick. Years ago, I was engaged to be married. Turned out she a con artist, whose mission was to distract me from hunting my parents’ killer. I swore I wouldn’t get taken in by a pretty face ever again. I expected you to be older and plain, not someone to fill my soul and steal my heart.”

She smiled. “I did that?”

“All that and more. Shane and his men are on Lewis’s heels. What do you say we get in on the action and ensure he never pulls another heist or kidnapping again?”

“You’d take me along?”

“The way I see it, you and I are unstoppable.”

Chapter 12

"I say different. I say you need to be stopped once and for all."

Talia froze as Lewis rounded the side of the cabin, gun drawn. Weston grabbed her and pushed her behind him. She felt the tension ripple through him as he faced the culprit. She barely drew a breath for fear of distracting Weston.

"How sweet to see the happy couple reunited. Just in time to die in each other's arms. How romantic."

"You should have lit out of the area when you had the chance," Weston said.

Lewis laughed. "And have your posse hunt me down like a cornered dog? Hardly my style." His laugh made Talia's skin crawl. "Maybe I won't kill the missus. At least not until I've had some fun—"

There was a loud crack, Lewis's face registered surprise before he slowly crumpled, lifeless, to the ground. Talia never even saw Weston draw the weapon he held in one hand as he walked over to Lewis, kicked his gun away and leaned over, his fingers probing the man's neck.

Talia moistened her lips. "Is he dead?"

Weston straightened. "Yup."

"You were—that was amazing. So fast."

"There was no time to waste. I sensed my wife was getting set to do something to try and distract Lewis."

"You couldn't know that. You had your back to me," she said.

"Didn't matter. I knew what you were thinking."

"Is mindreading a new skill you've developed recently, Sheriff?"

He reached her side and held her tight. "It is where you're concerned."

"So what am I thinking?"

"You're thinking we should both get cleaned up and go see if the party's still going strong next door."

"What about him?"

Weston shrugged. "He's not going anywhere. Shane can send a couple of his boys around later to haul the body to the undertakers."

She gave him a cocky smile. "I think you need a deputy to help

out. Maybe I should apply."

"Don't go getting any smart ideas. A wise man recently told me I'm a husband first and a lawman second."

"But—"

"Shane and a group of his men went after the others. Bets they're back by now with the thieves in tow?"

Talia repressed a smile. "Somehow, I have the feeling my betting days are behind me."

Weston nodded. "Your time is better spent teaching the youngsters about the Almighty."

~

THEY ARRIVED at the party just in time to see Shane and Lacey cutting into a fancy-tiered cake, amidst a thunder of applause. Talia turned to Weston. "Shane's back already!"

Weston gave a half-smile. "One of his men is a top-notch tracker. If they got the other two, they'll find our imposter's body as well."

"But—"

"Excuse me a minute, my love." He'd spotted Doc Kingsley and Mrs. Kingsley among the crowd, with Tom and his wife nearby. He tapped Tom on the shoulder and motioned toward the veterinarian. "Everything as it should be?"

Tom nodded. "Doc was being blackmailed. He didn't want to get implicated, so he left the track and came here."

Weston nodded. He'd get the full story from the doc tomorrow.

Talia looked worried as he returned to her. "You're sure things are under control?"

"They will be."

"Because I understand if you need to leave."

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. "Tomorrow is time enough for me to go fill out any paperwork I need to for the county. Right now, I'm going to dance with my wife."

"Are you saying you're still able to dance after catching a bullet in the leg?"

"I didn't say I'd dance well. Matter of fact, I'm told I always dance like I've got one wooden leg. For once, I have an excuse." He picked up her wrists and pressed a soft kiss to the marks on her skin. "Unless you don't feel up to sharing a dance with me."

"As long as it's a slow one. And we can hold each other tight."

"My favorite kind." He tilted his head toward the happy couple who had just stepped into each others' arms. "Seems like I'm not the only with my priorities in order. Look after the wife first, then the job."

Talia stepped into his arms. “Speaking of jobs. My cover’s still intact. No one knows I was out at the racetrack at your behest. When’s my next assignment?”

As their bodies swayed together in time to the music, he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss designed to steal her breath. “I’d prefer to keep you too busy at home with a passel of little ones, to be doing any more undercover work.”

Talia gave a contented smile. That was just fine with her. Weston had his faith back, and she had the life she’d always wanted. Besides, who was to say she couldn’t help out from behind the scenes?

~

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen blames a misspent youth watching Rawhide, Maverick and Bonanza for her fascination with cowboys. Historical or contemporary, cowboys continue to resonate with her today.

One of her heroes, Steele, is a modern-day cowboy, so when she was wooed by a man called Steel— Well, he's not a cowboy but he is an alpha male and her forever hero. Which is why all of her stories end Happily Ever After.

~

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